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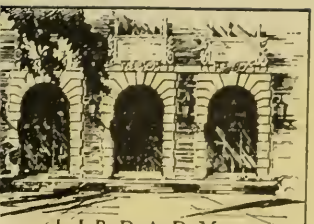
STANLEY·WEYMAN·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UNDER THE RED ROBE

UNDER THE RED ROBE

BY

STANLEY WEYMAN

AUTHOR OF 'A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE,' 'THE HOUSE OF THE WOLF' 'THE STORY OF FRANCIS CLUDDE'

ILLUSTRATED BY R. CATON WOODVILLE

IN TWO VOLUMES

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UNDER THE RED ROBE

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CHAPTER VIII

A MASTER STROKE—*continued*

I TOOK from my breast a little packet wrapped in soft leather, and I held it towards her.

'Will you open this?' I said. 'I believe that it contains what your brother lost. That it contains all I will not answer, Mademoiselle, because I spilled the stones on the floor of my room, and I may have failed to find some. But the others can be recovered; I know where they are.'

She took the packet slowly and began to unroll it, her fingers shaking. A few turns and the mild lustre of the stones shone out, making a kind of moonlight in her hands—such a

shimmering glory of imprisoned light as has ruined many a woman and robbed many a man of his honour. *Morbleu!* as I looked at them—and as she stood looking at them in dull, entranced perplexity—I wondered how I had come to resist the temptation.

While I gazed her hands began to waver.

'I cannot count,' she muttered helplessly. 'How many are there?'

'In all, eighteen.'

'There should be eighteen,' she said.

She closed her hand on them with that, and opened it again, and did so twice, as if to reassure herself that the stones were real and that she was not dreaming. Then she turned to me with sudden fierceness, and I saw that her beautiful face, sharpened by the greed of possession, was grown as keen and vicious as before.

'Well?' she muttered between her teeth. 'Your price, man? Your price?'

'I am coming to it now, Mademoiselle,' I said gravely. 'It is a simple matter. You

remember the afternoon when I followed you —clumsily and thoughtlessly perhaps—through the wood to restore these things? In seeming that happened about a month ago. I believe that it happened the day before yesterday. You called me then some very harsh names, which I will not hurt you by repeating. The only price I ask for the restoration of your jewels is that you on your part recall those names.'

'How?' she muttered. 'I do not understand.'

I repeated my words very slowly. 'The only price or reward I ask, Mademoiselle, is that you take back those names and say that they were not deserved.'

'And the jewels?' she exclaimed hoarsely.

'They are yours. They are not mine. They are nothing to me. Take them, and say that you do not think of me— Nay, I cannot say the words, Mademoiselle.'

'But there is something—else! What else?' she cried, her head thrown back, her eyes, bright as any wild animal's, searching mine. 'Ha! my brother? What of him? What of him, sir?'

'For him, Mademoiselle—I would prefer that you should tell me no more than I know already,' I answered in a low voice. 'I do not wish to be in that affair. But yes; there is one thing I have not mentioned. You are right.'

She sighed so deeply that I caught the sound.

'It is,' I continued slowly, 'that you will permit me to remain at Cocheforêt for a few days while the soldiers are here. I am told that there are twenty men and two officers quartered in your house. Your brother is away. I ask to be permitted, Mademoiselle, to take his place for the time, and to be privileged to protect your sister and yourself from insult. That is all.'

She raised her hand to her head. After a long pause,—

'The frogs!' she muttered, 'they croak! I cannot hear.'

Then, to my surprise, she turned quickly and suddenly on her heel, and walked over the bridge, leaving me standing there. For a moment I stood aghast, peering after her shadowy figure,

and wondering what had taken her. Then, in a minute or less she came quickly back to me, and I understood. She was crying.

'M. de Barthe,' she said, in a trembling voice, which told me that the victory was won, 'is there nothing else? Have you no other penance for me?'

'None, Mademoiselle.'

She had drawn the shawl over her head, and I no longer saw her face.

'That is all you ask?' she murmured.

'That is all I ask—now,' I answered.

'It is granted,' she said slowly and firmly. 'Forgive me if I seem to speak lightly—if I seem to make little of your generosity or my shame; but I can say no more now. I am so deep in trouble and so gnawed by terror that—I cannot feel anything keenly to-night, either shame or gratitude. I am in a dream; God grant that it may pass as a dream! We are sunk in trouble. But for you and what you have done, M. de Barthe—I—' she paused and I heard her fighting with the sobs which choked

her—'forgive me . . . I am overwrought. And my — my feet are cold,' she added, suddenly and irrelevantly. 'Will you take me home?'

'Ah, Mademoiselle,' I cried remorsefully, 'I have been a beast! You are barefoot, and I have kept you here.'

'It is nothing,' she said in a voice which thrilled me. 'My heart is warm, Monsieur — thanks to you. It is many hours since it has been as warm.'

She stepped out of the shadow as she spoke—and there, the thing was done. As I had planned, so it had come about. Once more I was crossing the meadow in the dark to be received at Cocheforêt, a welcome guest. The frogs croaked in the pool and a bat swooped round us in circles; and surely never—never, I thought, with a kind of exultation in my breast—had man been placed in a stranger position.

Somewhere in the black wood behind us—probably in the outskirts of the village—lurked M. de Cocheforêt. In the great house before us, outlined by a score of lighted windows, were the

soldiers come from Auch to take him. Between the two, moving side by side in the darkness, in a silence which each found to be eloquent, were Mademoiselle and I: she who knew so much, I who knew all—all but one little thing!

We reached the house, and I suggested that she should steal in first by the way she had come out, and that I should wait a little and knock at the door when she had had time to explain matters to Clon.

'They do not let me see Clon,' she answered slowly.

'Then your woman must tell him,' I rejoined, 'or he may do something and betray me.'

'They will not let our women come to us.'

'What?' I cried, astonished. 'But this is infamous. You are not prisoners!'

Mademoiselle laughed harshly.

'Are we not? Well, I suppose not; for if we wanted company, Captain Larolle said that he would be delighted to see us — in the parlour.'

'He has taken your parlour?' I said.

'He and his lieutenant sit there. But I suppose that we rebels should be thankful,' she added bitterly; 'we have still our bedrooms left to us.'

'Very well,' I said. 'Then I must deal with Clon as I can. But I have still a favour to ask, Mademoiselle. It is only that you and your sister will descend to-morrow at your usual time. I shall be in the parlour.'

'I would rather not,' she said, pausing and speaking in a troubled voice.

'Are you afraid?'

'No, Monsieur, I am not afraid,' she answered proudly, 'But—'

'You will come?' I said.

She sighed before she spoke. At length,—

'Yes, I will come—if you wish it,' she answered. And the next moment she was gone round the corner of the house, while I laughed to think of the excellent watch these gallant gentlemen were keeping. M. de Cocheforêt might have been with her in the garden, might have talked with her as I had talked, might have entered the house even, and passed under their noses scot-free. But that

is the way of soldiers. They are always ready for the enemy, with drums beating and flags flying—at ten o'clock in the morning. But he does not always come at that hour.

I waited a little, and then I groped my way to the door and knocked on it with the hilt of my sword. The dogs began to bark at the back, and the chorus of a drinking-song, which came fitfully from the east wing, ceased altogether. An inner door opened, and an angry voice, apparently an officer's, began to rate someone for not coming. Another moment, and a clamour of voices and footsteps seemed to pour into the hall, and fill it. I heard the bar jerked away, the door was flung open, and in a twinkling a lanthorn, behind which a dozen flushed visages were dimly seen, was thrust into my face.

'Why, who the fiend is this?' one cried, glaring at me in astonishment.

'*Morbleu!* It is the man!' another shrieked. 'Seize him!'

In a moment half a dozen hands were laid on my shoulders, but I only bowed politely.

'The officer, my friends,' I said, 'M. le Capitaine Larolle. Where is he?'

'*Diable!* but who are you, first?' the lanthorn-bearer retorted bluntly. He was a tall, lanky sergeant, with a sinister face.

'Well, I am not M. de Cocheforêt,' I replied; 'and that must satisfy you, my man. For the rest, if you do not fetch Captain Larolle at once and admit me, you will find the consequences inconvenient.'

'Ho! ho!' he said with a sneer. 'You can crow, it seems. Well, come in.'

They made way, and I walked into the hall keeping my hat on. On the great hearth a fire had been kindled, but it had gone out. Three or four carbines stood against one wall, and beside them lay a heap of haversacks and some straw. A shattered stool, broken in a frolic, and half a dozen empty wine-skins strewed the floor, and helped to give the place an air of untidiness and disorder. I looked round with eyes of disgust, and my gorge rose. They had spilled oil, and the place reeked foully.

'*Ventre bleu!*' I said. 'Is this conduct in a gentleman's house, you rascals? *Ma vie!* If I had you I would send half of you to the wooden horse!'

They gazed at me open-mouthed; my arrogance startled them. The sergeant alone scowled. When he could find his voice for rage—

'This way!' he said. 'We did not know that a general officer was coming, or we would have been better prepared!' And muttering oaths under his breath, he led me down the well-known passage. At the door of the parlour he stopped. 'Introduce yourself!' he said rudely. 'And if you find the air warm, don't blame me!'

I raised the latch and went in. At a table in front of the hearth, half covered with glasses and bottles, sat two men playing hazard. The dice rang sharply as I entered, and he who had just thrown kept the box over them while he turned, scowling, to see who came in. He was a fair-haired, blonde man, large-framed and florid. He had put off his cuirass and boots, and his doublet showed frayed and stained where the armour had

pressed on it. Otherwise he was in the extreme of last year's fashion. His deep cravat, folded over so that the laced ends drooped a little in front, was of the finest; his great sash of blue and silver was a foot wide. He had a little jewel in one ear, and his tiny beard was peaked *à l'Espagnole.* Probably when he turned he expected to see the sergeant, for at sight of me he rose slowly, leaving the dice still covered.

'What folly is this?' he cried, wrathfully. 'Here, sergeant! Sergeant! — without there! What the—! Who are you, sir?'

'Captain Larolle,' I said uncovering politely, 'I believe?'

'Yes, I am Captain Larolle,' he retorted. 'But who, in the fiend's name, are you? You are not the man we are after!'

'I am not M. Cocheforêt,' I said coolly. 'I am merely a guest in the house, M. le Capitaine. I have been enjoying Madame de Cocheforêt's hospitality for some time, but by an evil chance I was away when you arrived.' And with that I walked to the hearth, and, gently pushing aside

"You seem surprised to see me here. Believe me, I am much more surprised to see you."

his great boots which stood there drying, I kicked the logs into a blaze.

'*Mille diables!*' he whispered. And never did I see a man more confounded. But I affected to be taken up with his companion, a sturdy, white-mustachioed old veteran, who sat back in his chair, eyeing me with swollen cheeks and eyes surcharged with surprise.

'Good evening, M. le Lieutenant,' I said, bowing gravely. 'It is a fine night.'

Then the storm burst.

'Fine night!' the Captain shrieked, finding his voice at last. '*Mille diables!* Are you aware, sir, that I am in possession of this house, and that no one harbours here without my permission? Guest? Hospitality? Bundle of fiddle-faddle! Lieutenant, call the guard! Call the guard!' he continued passionately. 'Where is that ape of a sergeant?'

The Lieutenant rose to obey, but I lifted my hand.

'Gently, gently, Captain,' I said. 'Not so fast. You seem surprised to see me here. Believe me, I am much more surprised to see you.'

'*Sacré!*' he cried, recoiling at this fresh im-

pertinence, while the Lieutenant's eyes almost jumped out of his head.

But nothing moved me.

'Is the door closed?' I said sweetly. 'Thank you; it is, I see. Then permit me to say again, gentlemen, that I am much more surprised to see you than you can be to see me. For when Monseigneur the Cardinal honoured me by sending me from Paris to conduct this matter, he gave me the fullest—the fullest powers, M. le Capitaine—to see the affair to an end. I was not led to expect that my plans would be spoiled on the eve of success by the intrusion of half the garrison from Auch.'

'Oh ho!' the Captain said softly—in a very different tone, and with a very different face. 'So you are the gentleman I heard of at Auch?'

Very likely,' I said drily. 'But I am from Paris, not from Auch.'

'To be sure,' he answered thoughtfully. 'Eh, Lieutenant?'

'Yes, M. le Capitaine, no doubt,' the inferior replied. And they both looked at one another, and then at me, in a way I did not understand.

'I think,' said I, to clinch to matter, 'that you have made a mistake, Captain; or the Commandant has. And it occurs to me that the Cardinal will not be best pleased.'

'I hold the King's commission,' he answered rather stiffly.

'To be sure,' I replied. 'But, you see, the Cardinal—'

'Ay, but the Cardinal—' he rejoined quickly; and then he stopped and shrugged his shoulders. And they both looked at me.

'Well?' I said.

'The King,' he answered slowly.

'Tut-tut!' I exclaimed, spreading out my hands. 'The Cardinal. Let us stick to him. You were saying?'

'Well, the Cardinal, you see—' And then again, after the same words, he stopped—stopped abruptly, and shrugged his shoulders.

I began to suspect something.

'If you have anything to say against Monseigneur,' I answered, watching him narrowly, say it. But take a word of advice. Don't let it

go beyond the door of this room, my friend, and it will do you no harm.'

'Neither here nor outside,' he retorted, looking for a moment at his comrade. 'Only I hold the King's commission. That is all, and, I think, enough.'

'Well?' I said.

'Well—for the rest, will you throw a main?' he answered evasively. 'Good! Lieutenant, find a glass, and the gentleman a seat. And here, for my part, I will give you a toast. The Cardinal —whatever betide!'

I drank it, and sat down to play with him; I had not heard the music of the dice for a month, and the temptation was irresistible. But I was not satisfied. I called the mains and won his crowns—he was a mere baby at the game—but half my mind was elsewhere. There was something here that I did not understand; some influence at work on which I had not counted; something moving under the surface as unintelligible to me as the soldiers' presence. Had the Captain repudiated my commission altogether, and put me

to the door or sent me to the guard-house, I could have followed that. But these dubious hints, this passive resistance, puzzled me. Had they news from Paris, I wondered? Was the King dead? Or the Cardinal ill? I asked them, but they said no, no, no to all, and gave me guarded answers. And midnight found us still playing; and still fencing.

CHAPTER IX

THE QUESTION

'SWEEP the room, Monsieur? And remove this medley? But M. le Capitaine—'

'The Captain is in the village,' I replied sternly. 'And do you move. Move, man, and the thing will be done while you are talking about it. Set the door into the garden open—so.'

'Certainly, it is a fine morning. And the tobacco of M. le Lieutenant— But M. le Capitaine did not—'

'Give orders? Well, I give them,' I answered. 'First of all, remove these beds. And bustle, man, bustle, or I will find something to quicken you!'

In a moment—'And M. le Capitaine's riding-boots?'

'Place them in the passage,' I replied.

'Ohé! in the passage?' He paused, looking at them in doubt.

'Yes, booby; in the passage.'

'And the cloaks, Monsieur?'

'There is a bush handy outside the window. Let them air.'

'Ohé, the bush? Well, to be sure they are damp. But—yes, yes, Monsieur, it is done. And the holsters?'

'There also,' I said harshly. 'Throw them out. Faugh! The place reeks of leather. Now, a clean hearth. And set the table before the open door, so that we may see the garden—so. And tell the cook that we dine at eleven, and that Madame and Mademoiselle will descend.'

'Ohé! But M. le Capitaine ordered the dinner for half-past eleven.'

'It must be advanced, then; and, mark you, my friend, if it is not ready when Madame comes down, you will suffer, and the cook too.'

When he was gone on his errand, I looked round. What else was lacking? The sun shone cheerily on the polished floor; the air, freshened

by the rain which had fallen in the night, entered freely through the open doorway. A few bees lingering with the summer hummed outside. The fire crackled bravely; an old hound, blind and past work, lay warming its hide on the hearth. I could think of nothing more, and I stood and stood and watched the man set out the table and spread the cloth.

'For how many, Monsieur?' he asked in a scared tone.

'For five,' I answered; and I could not help smiling at myself.

For what would Zaton's say could it see Berault turned housewife? There was a white glazed cup, an old-fashioned piece of the second Henry's time, standing on a shelf. I took it down and put some late flowers in it, and set it in the middle of the table, and stood off myself to look at it. But a moment later, thinking I heard them coming, I hurried it away in a kind of panic, feeling on a sudden ashamed of the thing. The alarm proved to be false, however; and then again, taking another turn, I set the piece back. I had done

nothing so foolish for—for more years than I liked to count.

But when Madame and Mademoiselle came down, they had eyes neither for the flowers nor the room. They had heard that the Captain was out beating the village and the woods for the fugitive, and where I had looked for a comedy I found a tragedy. Madame's face was so red with weeping that all her beauty was gone. She started and shook at the slightest sound, and, unable to find any words to answer my greeting, could only sink into a chair and sit crying silently.

Mademoiselle was in a mood scarcely more cheerful. She did not weep, but her manner was hard and fierce. She spoke absently, and answered fretfully. Her eyes glittered, and she had the air of straining her ears continually to catch some dreaded sound.

'There is no news, Monsieur?' she said as she took her seat. And she shot a swift look at me.

'None, Mademoiselle.'

'They are searching the village?'

'I believe so.'

'Where is Clon?' This in a lower voice, and with a kind of shrinking in her face.

I shook my head. 'I believe that they have him confined somewhere. 'And Louis, too,' I said. 'But I have not seen either of them.'

'And where are— I thought these people would be here,' she muttered. And she glanced askance at the two vacant places. The servant had brought in the meal.

'They will be here presently,' I said coolly. 'Let us make the most of the time. A little wine and food will do Madame good.'

She smiled rather sadly.

'I think that we have changed places,' she said. And that you have turned host and we guests.'

'Let it be so,' I said cheerfully. 'I recommend some of this ragoût. Come, Mademoiselle, fasting can aid no one. A full meal has saved many a man's life.'

It was clumsily said, perhaps; for she shuddered and looked at me with a ghastly smile. But she persuaded her sister to take something; and she

took something on her own plate and raised her fork to her lips. But in a moment she laid it down again.

'I cannot,' she murmured. 'I cannot swallow. Oh, my God, at this moment they may be taking him.'

I thought that she was about to burst into a passion of tears, and I repented that I had induced her to descend. But her self-control was not yet exhausted. By an effort, painful to see, she recovered her composure. She took up her fork, and, and ate a few mouthfuls. Then she looked at me with a fierce under-look.

'I want to see Clon,' she whispered feverishly. The man who waited on us had left the room.

'He knows?' I said.

She nodded, her beautiful face strangely disfigured. Her closed teeth showed between her lips. Two red spots burned in her white cheeks, and she breathed quickly. I felt, as I looked at her, a sudden pain at my heart, and a shuddering fear, such as a man, awaking to find himself falling over a precipice, might feel. How these women loved the man!

For a moment I could not speak. When I found my voice it sounded dry and husky.

'He is a safe confidant,' I muttered. 'He can neither read nor write, Mademoiselle.'

'No, but—' and then her face became fixed. 'They are coming,' she whispered. 'Hush!' She rose stiffly, and stood supporting herself by the table. 'Have they — have they — found him?' she muttered. The woman by her side wept on, unconscious of what was impending.

I heard the Captain stumble far down the passage, and swear loudly; and I touched Mademoiselle's hand.

'They have not!' I whispered. 'All is well, Mademoiselle. Pray, pray calm yourself. Sit down and meet them as if nothing were the matter. And your sister! Madame, Madame,' I cried, almost harshly, 'compose yourself. Remember that you have a part to play.'

My appeal did something. Madame stifled her sobs. Mademoiselle drew a deep breath and sat down; and though she was still pale and still trembled, the worst was past.

And only just in time. The door flew open with a crash. The Captain stumbled into the room, swearing afresh.

'*Sacré nom du diable!*' he cried, his face crimson with rage. 'What fool placed these things here? My boots? My—'

His jaw fell. He stopped on the word, stricken silent by the new aspect of the room, by the sight of the little party at the table, by all the changes I had worked.

'*Saint Siège!*' he muttered. 'What is this?' The Lieutenant's grizzled face peering over his shoulder completed the picture.

'You are rather late, M. le Capitaine,' I said cheerfully. 'Madame's hour is eleven. But, come, here are your seats waiting for you.'

'*Mille tonnerres!*' he muttered, advancing into the room, and glaring at us.

'I am afraid that the ragoût is cold,' I continued, peering into the dish and affecting to see nothing. 'The soup, however, has been kept hot by the fire. But I think that you do not see Madame.'

He opened his mouth to swear, but for the moment he thought better of it.

'Who—who put my boots in the passage?' he asked, his voice thick with rage. He did not bow to the ladies, or take any notice of their presence.

'One of the men, I suppose,' I said indifferently. 'Is anything missing?'

He glared at me. Then his cloak, spread outside, caught his eye. He strode through the door, saw his holsters lying on the grass, and other things strewn about. He came back.

'Whose monkey game is this?' he snarled, and his face was very ugly. 'Who is at the bottom of this? Speak, sir, or I—'

'Tut-tut,—the ladies!' I said. 'You forget yourself, Monsieur.'

'Forget myself?' he hissed, and this time he did not check his oath. 'Don't talk to me of the ladies! Madame? Bah! Do you think, fool, that we are put into rebels' houses to bow and smile and take dancing lessons?'

'In this case a lesson in politeness were

more to the point, Monsieur,' I said sternly. And I rose.

'Was it by your orders that this was done?' he retorted, his brow black with passion. 'Answer, will you?'

'It was!' I replied outright.

'Then take that!' he cried, dashing his hat violently in my face, 'and come outside.'

'With pleasure, Monsieur,' I answered, bowing; 'in one moment. Permit me to find my sword. I think that it is in the passage.'

I went thither to get it.

When I returned, I found that the two men were waiting for me in the garden, while the ladies had risen from the table, and were standing near it with blanched faces.

'You had better take your sister upstairs, Mademoiselle,' I said gently, pausing a moment beside them. 'Have no fear. All will be well.'

'But what is it?' she answered, looking troubled. 'It was so sudden. I am—I did not understand. You quarrelled so quickly.'

'It is very simple, I answered, smiling. 'M.

le Capitaine insulted you yesterday; he will pay for it to-day. That is all. Or, not quite all,' I continued, dropping my voice and speaking in a different tone. 'His removal may help you, Mademoiselle. Do you understand? I think that there will be no more searching to-day.'

She uttered an exclamation, grasping my arm and peering into my face.

'You will kill him?' she muttered.

I nodded.

'Why not?' I said.

She caught her breath, and stood with one hand clasped to her bosom, gazing at me with parted lips, the blood mounting to her cheeks. Gradually the flush melted into a fierce smile.

'Yes, yes, why not?' she repeated between her teeth. 'Why not?' She had her hand on my arm, and I felt her fingers tighten until I could have winced. 'Why not? So you planned this—for us, Monsieur?'

I nodded.

'But can you?'

'Safely,' I said; then, muttering to her to

take her sister upstairs, I turned towards the garden. My foot was already on the threshold, and I was composing my face to meet the enemy, when I heard a movement behind me. The next moment her hand was on my arm.

'Wait! Wait a moment! Come back!' she panted. I turned. The smile and flush had vanished; her face was pale. 'No!' she said abruptly. 'I was wrong! I will not have it. I will have no part in it! You planned it last night, M. de Barthe. It is murder.'

'Mademoiselle!' I exclaimed, wondering. 'Murder? Why? It is a duel.'

'It is murder,' she answered persistently. 'You planned it last night. You said so.'

'But I risk my own life,' I replied sharply.

'Nevertheless—I will have no part in it,' she answered more faintly. She was trembling with agitation. Her eyes avoided mine.

'On my shoulders be it then!' I replied stoutly. 'It is too late, Mademoiselle, to go back. They are waiting for me. Only before I go, let me beg of you to retire.'

And I turned from her, and went out, wondering and thinking. First, that women were strange things. Secondly—*murder?* Merely because I had planned the duel and provoked the quarrel! Never had I heard anything so preposterous. Grant it, and dub every man who kept his honour with his hands a Cain—and a good many branded faces would be seen in some streets. I laughed at the fancy, as I strode down the garden walk.

And yet, perhaps, I was going to do a foolish thing. The Lieutenant would still be here: a hard-bitten man, of stiffer stuff than his Captain. And the troopers. What if, when I had killed their leader, they made the place too hot for me, Monseigneur's commission notwithstanding? I should look silly, indeed, if on the eve of success I were driven from the place by a parcel of jack-boots.

I liked the thought so little that I hesitated. Yet it seemed too late to retreat. The Captain and the Lieutenant were waiting for me in a little open space fifty yards from the house, where a narrower path crossed the broad walk, down which I had first seen Mademoiselle and her sister pacing. The Captain

The Captain and the Lieutenant were waiting . . . the Captain had removed his Doublet, and stood leaning against the Sundial.

had removed his doublet, and stood in his shirt leaning against the sundial, his head bare and his sinewy throat uncovered. He had drawn his rapier and stood pricking the ground impatiently. I marked his strong and nervous frame and his sanguine air: and twenty years earlier the sight might have damped me. But no thought of the kind entered my head now, and though I felt with each moment greater reluctance to engage, doubt of the issue had no place in my calculations.

I made ready slowly, and would gladly, to gain time, have found some fault with the place. But the sun was sufficiently high to give no advantage to either. The ground was good, the spot well chosen. I could find no excuse to put off the man, and I was about to salute him and fall to work when a thought crossed my mind.

'One moment!' I said. 'Supposing I kill you, M. le Capitaine, what becomes of your errand here?'

'Don't trouble yourself,' he answered with a sneer—he had misread my slowness and hesitation. 'It will not happen, Monsieur. And in

any case the thought need not harass you. I have a Lieutenant.'

'Yes, but what of my mission?' I replied bluntly. 'I have no lieutenant.'

'You should have thought of that before you interfered with my boots,' he retorted with contempt.

'True,' I said, overlooking his manner. 'But better late than never. I am not sure, now I think of it, that my duty to Monseigneur will let me fight.'

'You will swallow the blow?' he cried, spitting on the ground offensively. '*Diable!*' And the Lieutenant, standing on one side with his hands behind him and his shoulders squared, laughed grimly.

'I have not made up my mind,' I answered irresolutely.

'Well, *nom de Dieu!* make it up,' the Captain replied, with an ugly sneer. He took a swaggering step this way and that, playing his weapon. 'I am afraid, Lieutenant, that there will be no sport to-day,' he continued in a loud aside. 'Our cock has but a chicken heart.'

'Well,' I said coolly, 'I do not know what to do. Certainly it is a fine day, and a fair piece of ground. And the sun stands well. But I have not much to gain by killing you, M. le Capitaine, and it might get me into an awkward fix. On the other hand, it would not hurt me to let you go.'

'Indeed!' he said contemptuously, looking at me as I should look at a lackey.

'No!' I replied. 'For if you were to say that you had struck Gil de Berault and left the ground with a whole skin, no one would believe you.'

'Gil de Berault!' he exclaimed frowning.

'Yes, Monsieur,' I replied suavely. 'At your service. You did not know my name?'

'I thought that your name was De Barthe,' he said. His voice sounded queerly; and he waited for the answer with parted lips, and a shadow in his eyes which I had seen in men's eyes before.

'No,' I said; 'that was my mother's name. I took it for this occasion only.'

His florid cheek lost a shade of its colour, and he bit his lips as he glanced at the Lieutenant, trouble in his eyes. I had seen these signs before, and knew them, and I might have cried 'Chicken-heart!' in my turn; but I had not made a way of escape for him — before I declared myself—for nothing, and I held to my purpose.

'I think you will allow now,' I said grimly, 'that it will not harm me even if I put up with a blow!'

'M. de Berault's courage is known,' he muttered.

'And with reason,' I said. 'That being so, suppose that we say this day three months, M. le Capitaine? The postponement to be for my convenience.'

He caught the Lieutenant's eye and looked down sullenly, the conflict in his mind as plain as daylight. He had only to insist and I must fight; and if by luck or skill he could master me his fame as a duellist would run, like a ripple over water, through every garrison town in France and make him a name even in

Paris. On the other side were the imminent peril of death, the gleam of cold steel already in fancy at his breast, the loss of life and sunshine, and the possibility of a retreat with honour, if without glory. I read his face, and knew before he spoke what he would do.

'It appears to me that the burden is with you,' he said huskily; 'but for my part I am satisfied.'

'Very well,' I said, 'I take the burden. Permit me to apologise for having caused you to strip unnecessarily. Fortunately the sun is shining.'

'Yes,' he said gloomily. And he took his clothes from the sundial and began to put them on. He had expressed himself satisfied, but I knew that he was feeling very ill-satisfied, indeed, with himself; and I was not surprised when he presently said abruptly and almost rudely, 'There is one thing that I think we must settle here.'

'Yes?' I said. 'What is that?'

'Our positions,' he blurted out. 'Or we shall cross one another again within the hour.'

'Umph! I am not quite sure that I understand,' I said.

'That is precisely what I don't do—understand!' he retorted, in a tone of surly triumph. 'Before I came on this duty, I was told that there was a gentleman here, bearing sealed orders from the Cardinal to arrest M. de Cocheforêt; and I was instructed to avoid collision with him so far as might be possible. At first I took you for the gentleman. But the plague take me if I understand the matter now.'

'Why not?' I said coldly.

'Because—well, the question is in a nutshell!' he answered impetuously. 'Are you here on behalf of Madame de Cocheforêt, to shield her husband? Or are you here to arrest him? That is what I do not understand, M. de Berault.'

'If you mean, am I the Cardinal's agent—I am!' I answered sternly.

'To arrest M. de Cocheforêt?'

'To arrest M. de Cocheforêt.'

'Well—you surprise me,' he said.

Only that; but he spoke so drily that I felt the blood rush to my face.

'Take care, Monsieur,' I said severely. 'Do not presume too far on the inconvenience to which your death might put me.'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'No offence,' he said. But you do not seem, M. de Berault, to comprehend the difficulty. If we do not settle things now, we shall be bickering twenty times a day.'

'Well, what do you want?' I asked impatiently.

'Simply to know how you are going to proceed. So that our plans may not clash.'

'But surely, M. le Capitaine, that is my affair,' I said.

'The clashing?' he answered bitterly. Then he waved aside my wrath. 'Pardon,' he said, 'the point is simply this. How do you propose to find him if he is here?'

'That again is my affair,' I answered.

He threw up his hands in despair; but in a moment his place was taken by an unexpected disputant.

The Lieutenant, who had stood by all the time, listening and tugging at his grey moustache, suddenly spoke.

'Look here, M. de Berault,' he said, confronting me roughly, 'I do not fight duels. I am from the ranks. I proved my courage at Montauban in '21, and my honour is good enough to take care of itself. So I say what I like, and I ask you plainly what M. le Capitaine doubtless has in his mind, but does not ask: Are you running with the hare, and hunting with the hounds in this matter? In other words, have you thrown up Monseigneur's commission in all but name, and become Madame's ally; or—it is the only other alternative—are you getting at the man through the women?'

'You villain!' I cried, glaring at him in such a rage and fury that I could scarcely get the words out. This was plain speaking with

a vengeance! 'How dare you? How dare you say that I am false to the hand that pays me?'

I thought that he would blench, but he did not. He stood up stiff as a poker.

'I do not say; I ask!' he replied, facing me squarely, and slapping his fist into his open hand to drive home his words the better. 'I ask you whether you are playing the traitor to the Cardinal, or to these two women? It is a simple question.'

I fairly choked. 'You impudent scoundrel!' I said.

'Steady, steady!' he replied. 'Pitch sticks where it belongs, and nowhere else. But that is enough. I see which it is, M. le Capitaine; this way a moment, by your leave.'

And in a very cavalier fashion he took his officer by the arm, and drew him into a side-walk, leaving me to stand in the sun, bursting with anger and spleen. The gutter-bred rascal! That such a man should insult me, and with impunity! In Paris, I might have made him fight, but here it was impossible.

I was still foaming with rage when they returned.

'We have come to a determination,' the Lieutenant said, tugging his grey moustachios, and standing like a ramrod. 'We shall leave you the house and Madame, and you can take your own line to find the man. For ourselves, we shall draw off our men to the village, and we shall take our line. That is all, M. le Capitaine, is it not?'

'I think so,' the Captain muttered, looking anywhere but at me.

'Then we bid you good-day, Monsieur,' the Lieutenant added, and in a moment he turned his companion round, and the two retired up the walk to the house, leaving me to look after them in a black fit of rage and incredulity.

At the first flush, there was something so offensive in the manner of their going that anger had the upper hand. I thought of the Lieutenant's words, and I cursed him to hell with a sickening consciousness that I should not forget them in a hurry.

'Was I playing the traitor to the Cardinal or to

these women—which?' *Mon Dieu!* if ever question—but there, some day I would punish him. And the Captain? I could put an end to his amusement, at any rate; and I would. Doubtless among the country bucks of Auch he lorded it as a chief provincial bully, but I would cut his comb for him some fine morning behind the barracks.

And then as I grew cooler I began to wonder why they were going, and what they were going to do. They might be already on the track, or have the information they required under hand; in that case I could understand the movement. But if they were still searching vaguely, uncertain whether their quarry were in the neighbourhood or not, and uncertain how long they might have to stay, it seemed incredible that soldiers should move from good quarters to bad without motive.

I wandered down the garden, thinking sullenly of this, and pettishly cutting off the heads of the flowers with my sheathed sword. After all, if they found and arrested the man, what then? I should have to make my peace with the Cardinal as I best might. He would have gained his point, but not

through me, and I should have to look to myself. On the other hand, if I anticipated them—and, as a fact, I believed that I could lay my hand on the fugitive within a few hours—there would come a time when I must face Mademoiselle.

A little while back that had not seemed so difficult a thing. From the day of our first meeting—and in a higher degree since that afternoon when she had lashed me with her scorn—my views of her, and my feelings towards her, had been strangely made up of antagonism and sympathy ; of repulsion, because in her past and present she was so different from me ; of yearning, because she was a woman and friendless. Later I had duped her and bought her confidence by returning the jewels, and so in a measure I had sated my vengeance ; then, as a consequence, sympathy had again got the better of me, until now I hardly knew my own mind, or what I felt, or what I intended. *I did not know*, in fact, what I intended. I stood there in the garden with that conviction suddenly newborn in my mind ; and then, in a moment, I heard her step, and I turned to find her behind me.

Her face was like April, smiles breaking through her tears. As she stood with a tall hedge of sunflowers behind her, I started to see how beautiful she was.

'I am here in search of you, M. de Barthe,' she said, colouring slightly, perhaps because my eyes betrayed my thought; 'to thank you. You have not fought, and yet you have conquered. My woman has just been with me, and she tells me that they are going.'

'Going?' I said. 'Yes, Mademoiselle, they are leaving the house.'

She did not understand my reservation.

'What magic have you used?' she said almost gaily; it was wonderful how hope had changed her. 'Besides, I am curious to learn how you managed to avoid fighting.'

'After taking a blow?' I said bitterly.

'Monsieur, I did not mean that,' she said reproachfully.

But her face clouded. I saw that, viewed in this light—in which, I suppose, she had not hitherto—the matter perplexed her more than before.

I took a sudden resolution.

'Have you ever heard, Mademoiselle,' I said gravely, plucking off while I spoke the dead leaves from a plant beside me, 'of a gentleman by name De Berault? Known in Paris, I have heard, by the sobriquet of the Black Death?'

'The duellist?' she answered, looking at me in wonder. 'Yes, I have heard of him. He killed a young gentleman of this province at Nancy two years back. 'It was a sad story,' she continued, shuddering slightly, 'of a dreadful man. God keep our friends from such!'

'Amen!' I said quietly. But, in spite of myself, I could not meet her eyes.

'Why?' she answered, quickly taking alarm at my silence. 'What of him, M. de Barthe? Why have you mentioned him?'

'Because he is here, Mademoiselle.'

'Here?' she exclaimed. 'At Cocheforêt?'

'Yes, Mademoiselle,' I answered soberly. 'I am he.'

CHAPTER X

CLON

'YOU!' she cried, in a voice which pierced my heart. 'You are M. de Berault? It is impossible!' But, glancing askance at her—I could not face her—I saw that the blood had left her cheeks.

'Yes, Mademoiselle,' I answered in a low tone. 'De Barthe was my mother's name. When I came here, a stranger, I took it that I might not be known; that I might again speak to a good woman, and not see her shrink. That, and—but why trouble you with all this?' I continued rebelling, against her silence, her turned shoulder, her averted face. 'You asked me, Mademoiselle,

how I could take a blow and let the striker go. I have answered. It is the one privilege M. de Berault possesses.'

'Then,' she replied almost in a whisper, 'if I were M. de Berault, I would avail myself of it, and never fight again.'

'In that event, Mademoiselle,' I answered coldly, 'I should lose my men friends as well as my women friends. Like Monseigneur the Cardinal, rule by fear.'

She shuddered, either at the name or at the idea my words called up; and, for a moment, we stood awkwardly silent. The shadow of the sun-dial fell between us; the garden was still; here and there a leaf fluttered slowly down. With each instant of that silence, of that aversion, I felt the gulf between us growing wider, I felt myself growing harder; I mocked at her past which was so unlike mine; I mocked at mine, and called it fate. I was on the point of turning from her with a bow—and with a furnace in my breast—when she spoke.

'There is a last rose lingering there,' she said

a slight tremor in her voice. 'I cannot reach it. Will you pluck it for me, M. de Berault?'

I obeyed her, my hand trembling, my face on fire. She took the rose from me, and placed it in the bosom of her dress. And I saw that her hand trembled too, and that her cheek was dark with blushes.

She turned without more, and began to walk towards the house. 'Heaven forbid that I should misjudge you a second time!' she said in a low voice. 'And, after all, who am I that I should judge you at all? An hour ago, I would have killed that man had I possessed the power.'

'You repented, Mademoiselle,' I said huskily. I could scarcely speak.

'Do you never repent?' she said.

'Yes. But too late, Mademoiselle.'

'Perhaps it is never too late,' she answered softly.

'Alas, when a man is dead—'

'You may rob a man of worse than life!' she replied with energy, stopping me by a gesture 'If you have never robbed a man—or a woman

—of honour! If you have never ruined boy or girl, M. de Berault! If you have never pushed another into the pit and gone by it yourself! If—but, for murder? Listen. You are a Romanist, but I am a Huguenot, and have read. "Thou shalt not kill!" it is written; and the penalty "By man shall thy blood be shed!" But, "If you cause one of these little ones to offend, it were *better* for you that a mill-stone were hanged about your neck, and that you were cast into the depths of the sea."'

'Mademoiselle, you are merciful,' I muttered.

'I need mercy myself,' she answered, sighing. 'And I have had few temptations. How do I know what you have suffered?'

'Or done!' I said, almost rudely.

'Where a man has not lied, nor betrayed, nor sold himself or others,' she answered in a low tone, 'I think I can forgive all else. I can better put up with force,' she added smiling sadly, 'than with fraud.'

Ah, Dieu! I turned away my face that she might not see how pale it grew; that she might

not guess how her words, meant in mercy, stabbed me to the heart. And yet, then, for the first time, while viewing in all its depth and width the gulf which separated us, I was not hardened; I was not cast back upon myself. Her gentleness, her pity, her humility softened me, while they convicted me. My God, how, after this, could I do that which I had come to do? How could I stab her in the tenderest part, how could I inflict on her that rending pang, how could I meet her eyes, and stand before her, a Caliban, a Judas, the vilest, lowest thing she could conceive?

I stood, a moment, speechless and disordered; overcome by her words, by my thoughts. I have seen a man so stand when he has lost all at the tables. Then I turned to her; and for an instant I thought that my tale was told already, I thought that she had pierced my disguise. For her face was changed—stricken as with fear. The next moment, I saw that she was not looking at me, but beyond me; and I turned quickly and saw a servant hurrying from the house to us. It was

Louis. His eyes were staring, his hair waved, his cheeks were flabby with dismay. He breathed as if he had been running.

'What is it?' Mademoiselle cried, while he was still some way off. 'Speak, man. My sister? Is she—'

'Clon,' he gasped.

The name changed her to stone.

'Clon? What of him?' she muttered.

'In the village!' Louis panted, his tongue stuttering with terror. 'They are flogging him! They are killing him! To make him tell!'

Mademoiselle grasped the sundial and leant against it, her face colourless; and, for an instant, I thought that she was fainting.

'Tell?' I said mechanically. 'But he cannot tell. He is dumb, man.'

'They will make him guide them,' Louis groaned, covering his ears with his shaking hands, his face the colour of paper. 'And his cries! Oh, Monsieur, go, go!' he continued, in a thrilling tone. 'Save him. All through the wood I heard his cries. It was horrible! horrible!'

Mademoiselle uttered a moan of pain; and I turned to support her, thinking each second to see her fall. But with a sudden movement she straightened herself, and, quickly slipping by me, with eyes that seemed to see nothing, she set off swiftly down the walk towards the meadow gate.

I ran after her; but, taken by surprise as I was, it was only by a great effort I reached the gate before her, and thrusting myself in the road, barred the way.

'Let me pass!' she panted, striving to thrust me on one side. 'Out of my way, sir! I am going to the village.'

'You are not going to the village,' I said sternly. 'Go back to the house, Mademoiselle, and at once.'

'My servant!' she wailed. 'Let me go! Let me go! Do you think I can rest here while they torture him? He cannot speak, and they—they—'

'Go back, Mademoiselle,' I said, with decision. 'Your presence would only make matters worse! I will go myself, and what one man can do against

many, I will! Louis, give your mistress your arm and take her to the house. Take her to Madame.'

'But you will go?' she cried. And before I could stay her—I swear I would have stopped her if I could—she raised my hand and carried it to her trembling lips. 'You will go! Go and stop them! Stop them, and Heaven reward you, Monsieur!'

I did not answer; nay, I did not once look back, as I crossed the meadow; but I did not look forward either. Doubtless it was grass I trod, and the wood was before me with the sun shining aslant on it; doubtless the house rose behind me with a flame here and there in the windows. But I went in a dream, among shadows; with a racing pulse, in a glow from head to heel; conscious of nothing but the touch of Mademoiselle's warm lips on my hand, seeing neither meadow nor house, nor even the dark fringe of wood before me, but only Mademoiselle's passionate face. For the moment I was drunk: drunk with that to which I had been so long a stranger, with that which a man may scorn for years, to find it at last

beyond his reach — drunk with the touch of a good woman's lips.

I passed the bridge in this state; and my feet were among the brushwood before the heat and fervour in which I moved found on a sudden their direction. Something began to penetrate to my veiled senses—a hoarse inarticulate cry, now deep, now shrilling horribly, that of itself seemed to fill the wood. It came at intervals of half a minute or so, and made the flesh creep, it rang so full of dumb pain, of impotent wrestling, of unspeakable agony. I am a man and have seen things. I saw the Concini beheaded, and Chalais ten years later—they gave him thirty-four blows; and when I was a boy I escaped from the college and viewed from a great distance Ravaillac torn by horses—that was in the year ten. But the horrible cries I now heard, filled me, perhaps because I was alone and fresh from the sight of Mademoiselle, with loathing inexpressible. The very wood, though the sun had not yet set, seemed to grow dark. I ran on through it, cursing, until the hovels of the village

came in sight. Again the shriek rose, a pulsing horror; and this time I could hear the lash fall on the sodden flesh, I could see in fancy the dumb man, trembling, quivering, straining against his bonds. And then, in a moment, I was in the street, and, as the scream once more tore the air, I dashed round the corner by the inn, and came upon them.

I did not look at *him*, but I saw Captain Larolle and the Lieutenant, and a ring of troopers, and one man, bare-armed, teasing out with his fingers the thongs of a whip. The thongs dripped blood, and the sight fired the mine. The rage I had suppressed when the Lieutenant bearded me earlier in the afternoon, the passion with which Mademoiselle's distress had filled my breast, on the instant found vent. I sprang through the line of soldiers; and striking the man with the whip a buffet between the shoulders, which hurled him breathless to the ground, I turned on the leaders.

'You fiends!' I cried. 'Shame on you! The man is dumb! Dumb; and if I had ten men with me, I would sweep you and your scum out of the

I Sprang through the Line of Soldiers.

village with broomsticks. Lay on another lash,' I continued recklessly, 'and I will see whether you or the Cardinal be the stronger.'

The Lieutenant glared at me, his grey moustache bristling, his eyes almost starting from his head. Some of the troopers laid their hands on their swords, but no one moved, and only the Captain spoke.

'*Mille diables!*' he swore. 'What is all this about? Are you mad, sir?'

'Mad or sane!' I cried furiously. 'Lay on another lash, and you shall repent it.'

For an instant there was a pause of astonishment. Then, to my surprise, the Captain laughed —laughed loudly.

'Very heroic,' he said. 'Quite magnificent, M. Chevalier-errant. But you see, unfortunately, you come too late.'

'Too late,' I said incredulously.

'Yes, too late,' he replied, with a mocking smile. And the Lieutenant grinned too. 'Unfortunately, you see, the man has just confessed. We have only been giving him an extra touch or two, to

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impress his memory, and save us the trouble of lashing him up again.'

'I don't believe it,' I said bluntly—but I felt the check, and fell to earth. 'The man cannot speak.'

'No, but he has managed to tell us what we want; that he will guide us to the place we are seeking,' the Captain answered drily. 'The whip, if it cannot find a man a tongue, can find him wits. What is more, I think that he will keep his word,' he continued, with a hideous scowl. 'For I warn him that if he does not, all your heroics shall not save him. He is a rebel dog, and known to us of old; and I will flay his back to the bones, ay, until we can see his heart beating through his ribs, but I will have what I want —in your teeth, too, you d—d meddler.'

'Steady, steady!' I said, sobered. I saw that he was telling the truth. 'Is he going to take you to M. de Cocheforêt's hiding-place?'

'Yes, he is!' the Captain retorted. 'Have you any objection to that, Master Spy?'

'None,' I replied. 'Only I shall go with you.

And if you live three months, I shall kill you for that name—behind the barracks at Auch, M. le Capitaine.'

He changed colour, but he answered me boldly enough.

'I don't know that you will go with us,' he said, with a snarl. 'That is as we please.'

'I have the Cardinal's orders,' I said sternly.

'The Cardinal?' he exclaimed, stung to fury by this repetition of the name. 'The Cardinal be—'

But the Lieutenant laid his hand on his lips and stopped him.

'Hush!' he said. Then more quietly, 'Your pardon, M. le Capitaine; but the least said the soonest mended. Shall I give orders to the men to fall in?'

The Captain nodded sullenly.

The Lieutenant turned to his prisoner.

'Take him down!' he commanded, in his harsh, monotonous voice. 'Throw his blouse over him, and tie his hands. And do you two, Paul and Lebrun, guard him. Michel, bring the whip, or he

may forget how it tastes. Sergeant, choose four good men, and dismiss the rest to their quarters.'

'Shall we need the horses?' the sergeant asked.

'I don't know,' the Captain answered peevishly. 'What does the rogue say?'

The Lieutenant stepped up to him.

'Listen!' he said grimly. 'Nod if you mean yes, and shake your head if you mean no. And have a care you answer truly. Is it more than a mile to this place?'

They had loosened the poor wretch's fastenings, and covered his back. He stood leaning his shoulder against his wall, the mouth still panting, the sweat running down his hollow cheeks. His sunken eyes were closed, but a quiver now and again ran through his frame. The Lieutenant repeated his question, and, getting no answer, looked round for orders. The Captain met the look, and crying savagely, 'Answer will you, you mule!' struck the half-swooning miserable across the back with his switch. The effect was magical. Covered, as his shoulders were, the man sprang erect with a shriek of pain, raising his chin, and

hollowing his back; and in that attitude stood an instant with starting eyes, gasping for breath. Then he sank back against the wall, moving his mouth spasmodically. His face was the colour of lead.

'Diable! I think that we have gone too far with him!' the Captain muttered.

'Bring some wine!' the Lieutenant replied. 'Quick with it!'

I looked on, burning with indignation, and in some excitement besides. For if the man took them to the place, and they succeeded in seizing Cocheforêt, there was an end of the matter as far as I was concerned. It was off my shoulders, and I might leave the village when I pleased; nor was it likely—since he would have his man, though not through me — that the Cardinal would refuse to grant me an amnesty. On the whole, I thought that he would prefer that things should take this course; and assuming the issue, I began to wonder whether it would be necessary in that event that Madame should know the truth. I had a kind of vision of a reformed Berault, dead to play and purging himself at a distance from Zaton's; winning, perhaps, a

name in the Italian war, and finally—but, pshaw! I was a fool.

However, be these things as they might, it was essential that I should see the arrest made; and I waited patiently while they revived the tortured man, and made their dispositions. These took some time; so that the sun was down, and it was growing dusk when we marched out, Clon going first, supported by his two guards, the Captain and I following—abreast, and eyeing one another suspiciously; the Lieutenant, with the sergeant and five troopers, bringing up the rear. Clon moved slowly, moaning from time to time; and but for the aid given him by the two men with him, must have sunk down again and again.

He led the way out between two houses close to the inn, and struck a narrow track, scarcely discernible, which ran behind other houses, and then plunged into the thickest part of the wood. A single person, traversing the covert, might have made such a track; or pigs, or children. But it was the first idea that occurred to us, and put us all on the alert. The Captain carried a cocked

pistol, I held my sword drawn, and kept a watchful eye on *him;* and the deeper the dusk fell in the wood, the more cautiously we went, until at last we came out with a sort of jump into a wider and lighter path.

I looked up and down, and saw behind me a vista of tree-trunks, before me a wooden bridge and an open meadow, lying cold and grey in the twilight; and I stood in astonishment. We were in the old path to the Château! I shivered at the thought that he was going to take us there, to the house, to Mademoiselle!

The Captain also recognised the place, and swore aloud. But the dumb man went on unheeding until he reached the wooden bridge. There he stopped short, and looked towards the dark outline of the house, which was just visible, one faint light twinkling sadly in the west wing. As the Captain and I pressed up behind him, he raised his hands and seemed to wring them towards the house.

'Have a care!' the Captain growled. 'Play me no tricks, or—'

He did not finish the sentence, for Clon, as if he

well understood his impatience, turned back from the bridge, and, entering the wood to the left, began to ascend the bank of the stream. We had not gone a hundred yards before the ground grew rough, and the undergrowth thick; and yet through all ran a kind of path which enabled us to advance, dark as it was now growing. Very soon the bank on which we moved began to rise above the water, and grew steep and rugged. We turned a shoulder, where the stream swept round a curve, and saw we were in the mouth of a small ravine, dark and sheer-sided. The water brawled along the bottom, over boulders and through chasms. In front, the slope on which we stood shaped itself into a low cliff; but halfway between its summit and the water a ledge, or narrow terrace, running along the face, was dimly visible.

'Ten to one, a cave!' the Captain muttered. 'It is a likely place.'

'And an ugly one!' I replied with a sneer. 'Which one against ten might hold for hours!'

'If the ten had no pistols—yes!' he answered

viciously. 'But you see we have. Is he going that way?'

He was. As soon as this was clear, Larolle turned to his comrade.

'Lieutenant,' he said, speaking in a low voice, though the chafing of the stream below us covered ordinary sounds; 'what say you? Shall we light the lanthorns, or press on while there is still a glimmering of day?'

'On, I should say, M. le Capitaine,' the Lieutenant answered. 'Prick him in the back if he falters. I will warrant,' the brute added with a chuckle, 'he has a tender place or two.'

The Captain gave the word and we moved forward. It was evident now that the cliff-path was our destination. It was possible for the eye to follow the track all the way to it, through rough stones and brushwood; and though Clon climbed feebly, and with many groans, two minutes saw us step on to it. It did not prove to be, in fact, the perilous place it looked at a distance. The ledge, grassy and terrace-like, sloped slightly downwards and outwards, and in parts was slippery; but it was as

wide as a highway, and the fall to the water did not exceed thirty feet. Even in such a dim light as now displayed it to us, and by increasing the depth and unseen dangers of the gorge gave a kind of impressiveness to our movements, a nervous woman need not have feared to tread it. I wondered how often Mademoiselle had passed along it with her milk-pitcher.

'I think that we have him now,' Captain Larolle muttered, twisting his moustachios, and looking about to make his last dispositions. 'Paul and Lebrun, see that your man makes no noise. Serjeant, come forward with your carbine, but do not fire without orders. Now, silence all, and close up, Lieutenant. Forward!'

We advanced about a hundred paces, keeping the cliff on our left, turned a shoulder, and saw, a few paces in front of us a slight hollow, a black blotch in the grey duskiness of the cliff-side. The prisoner stopped, and, raising his bound hands, pointed to it.

'There?' the Captain whispered, pressing forward. 'Is it the place?'

Clon nodded. The Captain's voice shook with excitement.

'Paul and Lebrun remain here with the prisoner,' he said, in a low tone. 'Sergeant, come forward with me. Now, are you ready? Forward!'

At the word he and the sergeant passed quickly, one on either side of Clon and his guards. The path grew narrow here, and the Captain passed outside. The eyes of all but one were on the black blotch, the hollow in the cliff-side, expecting we knew not what—a sudden shot or the rush of a desperate man; and no one saw exactly what happened. But somehow, as the Captain passed abreast of him, the prisoner thrust back his guards, and leaping sideways, flung his unbound arms round Larolle's body, and in an instant swept him, shouting, to the verge of the precipice.

It was done in a moment. By the time our startled wits and eyes were back with them, the two were already tottering on the edge, looking in the gloom like one dark form. The sergeant, who was the first to find his head, levelled his carbine, but, as the wrestlers twirled and twisted, the Captain

shrieking out oaths and threats, the mute silent as death, it was impossible to see which was which, and the sergeant lowered his gun again, while the men held back nervously. The ledge sloped steeply there, the edge was vague, already the two seemed to be wrestling in mid air; and the mute was desperate.

That moment of hesitation was fatal. Clon's long arms were round the other's arms, crushing them into his ribs; Clon's skull-like face grinned hate into the other's eyes; his bony limbs curled round him like the folds of a snake. Larolle's strength gave way.

'Damn you all! Why don't you come up?' he cried. And then, 'Ah! Mercy! mercy!' came in one last scream from his lips. As the Lieutenant, taken aback before, sprang forward to his aid, the two toppled over the edge, and in a second hurtled out of sight.

'*Mon Dieu!*' the Lieutenant cried; the answer was a dull splash in the depths below. He flung up his arms. 'Water!' he said. 'Quick, men, get down. We may save him yet.'

But there was no path, and night was come, and the men's nerves were shaken. The lanthorns had to be lit, and the way to be retraced; by the time we reached the dark pool which lay below, the last bubbles were gone from the surface, the last ripples had beaten themselves out against the banks. The pool still rocked sullenly, and the yellow light showed a man's hat floating, and near it a glove three parts submerged. But that was all. The mute's dying grip had known no loosening, nor his hate any fear. I heard afterwards that when they dragged the two out next day, his fingers were in the other's eye-sockets, his teeth in his throat. If ever man found death sweet, it was he!

As we turned slowly from the black water, some shuddering, some crossing themselves, the Lieutenant looked at me.

'Curse you!' he said passionately. 'I believe that you are glad.'

'He deserved his fate,' I answered coldly. 'Why should I pretend to be sorry? It was now or in three months. And for the other poor devil's sake I am glad.'

He glared at me for a moment in speechless anger.

At last, 'I should like to have you tied up!' he said between his teeth.

'I should think that you had had enough of tying up for one day!' I retorted. 'But there,' I went on contemptuously, 'it comes of making officers out of the canaille. Dogs love blood. The teamster must lash something if he can no longer lash his horses.'

We were back, a sombre little procession, at the wooden bridge when I said this. He stopped.

'Very well,' he replied, nodding viciously. 'That decides me. Sergeant, light me this way with a lanthorn. The rest of you to the village. Now, Master Spy,' he continued, glancing at me with gloomy spite. 'Your road is my road. I think I know how to spoil your game.'

I shrugged my shoulders in disdain, and together, the sergeant leading the way with the light, we crossed the dim meadow, and passed through the gate where Mademoiselle had kissed my hand, and up the ghostly walk between the

rose bushes. I wondered uneasily what the Lieutenant would be at, and what he intended; but the lanthorn-light which now fell on the ground at our feet, and now showed one of us to the other, high-lit in a frame of blackness, discovered nothing in his grizzled face but settled hostility. He wheeled at the end of the walk to go to the main door, but as he did so I saw the flutter of a white skirt by the stone seat against the house, and I stepped that way.

'Mademoiselle?' I said softly. 'Is it you?'

'Clon?' she muttered, her voice quivering. 'What of him?'

'He is past pain,' I answered gently. 'He is dead—yes, dead, Mademoiselle, but in his own way. Take comfort.'

She stifled a sob; then before I could say more, the Lieutenant, with his sergeant and light, were at my elbow. He saluted Mademoiselle roughly. She looked at him with shuddering abhorrence.

'Are you come to flog me too, sir?' she said passionately. 'Is it not enough that you have murdered my servant?'

'On the contrary, it was he who killed my Captain,' the Lieutenant answered, in another tone than I had expected. 'If your servant is dead so is my comrade.'

'Captain Larolle?' she murmured, gazing with startled eyes, not at him but at me.

I nodded.

'How?' she asked.

'Clon flung the Captain and himself—into the river pool above the bridge,' I said.

She uttered a low cry of awe and stood silent; but her lips moved and I think that she prayed for Clon, though she was a Huguenot. Meanwhile, I had a fright. The lanthorn, swinging in the sergeant's hand, and throwing its smoky light now on the stone seat, now on the rough wall above it, showed me something else. On the seat, doubtless where Mademoiselle's hand had lain as she sat in the dark, listening and watching and shivering, stood a pitcher of food. Beside her, in that place, it was damning evidence, and I trembled lest the Lieutenant's eye should fall upon it, lest the sergeant should see it; and then, in a moment,

I forgot all about it. The Lieutenant was speaking, and his voice was doom. My throat grew dry as I listened; my tongue stuck to my mouth. I tried to look at Mademoiselle, but I could not.

'It is true that the Captain is gone,' he said stiffly, 'but others are alive, and about one of them a word with you, by your leave Mademoiselle. I have listened to a good deal of talk from this fine gentleman friend of yours. He has spent the last twenty-four hours saying "You shall!" and "You shall not!" He came from you and took a very high tone because we laid a little whip-lash about that dumb devil of yours. He called us brutes and beasts, and but for him I am not sure that my friend would not now be alive. But when he said a few minutes ago that he was glad —glad of it, d— him!—then I fixed it in my mind that I would be even with him. And I am going to be!'

'What do you mean?' Mademoiselle asked, wearily interrupting him. 'If you think that you can prejudice me against this gentleman—'

'That is precisely what I am going to do! And a little more than that!' he answered.

'You will be only wasting your breath!' she retorted.

'Wait! Wait, Mademoiselle — until you have heard,' he said. 'For I swear to you that if ever a black-hearted scoundrel, a dastardly sneaking spy trod the earth, it is this fellow! And I am going to expose him. Your own eyes and your own ears shall persuade you. I am not particular, but I would not eat, I would not drink, I would not sit down with him! I would rather be beholden to the meanest trooper in my squadron than to him! Ay, I would, so help me Heaven!'

And the Lieutenant, turning squarely on his heel, spat on the ground.

CHAPTER X

THE ARREST

IT had come, and I saw no way of escape. The sergeant was between us and I could not strike him. And I found no words. A score of times I had thought with shrinking how I should reveal my secret to Mademoiselle—what I should say, and how she would take it; but in my mind it had been always a voluntary act, this disclosure, it had been always I who unmasked myself and she who listened—alone; and in this voluntariness and this privacy there had been something which took from the shame of anticipation. But here—here was no voluntary act on my part, no privacy, nothing but shame. And I stood mute, convicted, speechless, under her eyes—like the thing I was.

Yet if anything could have braced me it was Mademoiselle's voice when she answered him.

'Go on, Monsieur,' she said calmly, 'you will have done the sooner.'

'You do not believe me?' he replied. 'Then, I say, look at him! Look at him! If ever shame—'

'Monsieur,' she said abruptly—she did not look at me, 'I am ashamed of myself.'

'But you don't hear me,' the Lieutenant rejoined hotly. 'His very name is not his own! He is not Barthe at all. He is Berault, the gambler, the duellist, the bully; whom if you—'

Again she interrupted him.

'I know it,' she said coldly. 'I know it all; and if you have nothing more to tell me, go, Monsieur. Go!' she continued in a tone of infinite scorn. 'Be satisfied, that you have earned my contempt as well as my abhorrence.'

He looked for a moment taken aback. Then,—

'Ay, but I *have* more,' he cried, his voice stubbornly triumphant. 'I forgot that you would think little of that. I forgot that a swordsman

has always the ladies' hearts—but I have more. Do you know, too, that he is in the Cardinal's pay? Do you know that he is here on the same errand which brings us here — to arrest M. de Cocheforêt? Do you know that while we go about the business openly and in soldier fashion, it is his part to worm himself into your confidence, to sneak into Madame's intimacy, to listen at your door, to follow your footsteps, to hang on your lips, to track you — track you until you betray yourselves and the man? Do you know this, and that all his sympathy is a lie, Mademoiselle? His help, so much bait to catch the secret? His aim, blood-money — blood-money? Why, *morbleu!*' the Lieutenant continued, pointing his finger at me, and so carried away by passion, so lifted out of himself by wrath and indignation, that I shrank before him—'you talk, lady, of contempt and abhorrence in the same breath with me, but what have you for him—what have you for him—the spy, the informer, the hired traitor? And if you doubt me, if you want evidence, look at him. Only look at him, I say.'

And he might say it; for I stood silent still, cowering and despairing, white with rage and hate. But Mademoiselle did not look. She gazed straight at the Lieutenant.

'Have you done?' she said.

'Done?' he stammered; her words, her air, bringing him to earth again. 'Done? Yes, if you believe me.'

'I do not,' she answered proudly. 'If that be all, be satisfied, Monsieur. I do not believe you.'

'Then tell me this,' he retorted, after a moment of stunned surprise. 'Answer me this! Why, if he was not on our side, do you think that we let him remain here? Why did we suffer him to stay in a suspected house, bullying us, annoying us, thwarting us, taking your part from hour to hour?'

'He has a sword, Monsieur,' she answered with fine contempt.

'*Mille diables!*' he cried, snapping his fingers in a rage. 'That for his sword! It was because he held the Cardinal's commission, I tell you, because he had equal authority with us. Because we had no choice.'

'And that being so, Monsieur, why are you now betraying him?' she asked.

He swore at that, feeling the stroke go home.

'You must be mad!' he said, glaring at her. 'Cannot you see that the man is what I tell you? Look at him! Look at him, I say! Listen to him! Has he a word to say for himself?'

Still she did not look.

'It is late,' she replied coldly. 'And I am not very well. If you have done, quite done—perhaps, you will leave me, Monsieur.'

'*Mon Dieu!*' he exclaimed, shrugging his shoulders, and grinding his teeth in impotent rage. 'You *are* mad! I have told you the truth, and you will not believe it. Well—on your head be it then, Mademoiselle. I have no more to say! You will see.'

And with that, without more, fairly conquered by her staunchness, he saluted her, gave the word to the sergeant, turned and went down the path. The sergeant went after him, the lanthorn swaying in his hand. And we two were left alone.

The frogs were croaking in the pool; a bat flew round in circles; the house, the garden, all lay quiet under the darkness, as on the night when I first came to it.

And would to Heaven I had never come—that was the cry in my heart. Would to Heaven I had never seen this woman, whose nobleness and faith were a continual shame to me; a reproach branding me every hour I stood in her presence with all vile and hateful names. The man just gone, coarse, low-bred, brutal soldier as he was, man-flogger and drilling-block, had yet found heart to feel my baseness, and words in which to denounce it. What, then, would she say, when the truth came home to her? What shape should I take in her eyes then? How should I be remembered through all the years then?

Then? But now? What was she thinking now, at this moment as she stood silent and absorbed near the stone seat, a shadowy figure with face turned from me? Was she recalling the man's words, fitting them to the facts and the past, adding this and that circumstance?

Was she, though she had rebuffed him in the body, collating, now he was gone, all that he had said, and out of these scraps piecing together the damning truth? Was she, for all that she had said, beginning to see me as I was? The thought tortured me. I could brook uncertainty no longer. I went nearer to her and touched her sleeve.

'Mademoiselle,' I said in a voice which sounded hoarse and unnatural even in my own ears, 'do you believe this of me?'

She started violently, and turned.

'Pardon, Monsieur!' she murmured, passing her hand over her brow; 'I had forgotten that you were here. Do I believe—what?'

'What that man said of me,' I muttered.

'That!' she exclaimed. And then she stood a moment gazing at me in a strange fashion. 'Do I believe that, Monsieur? But come, come!' she continued impetuously. 'Come, and I will show you if I believe it. But not here.'

She turned as she spoke, and led the way on the instant into the house through the parlour door, which stood half open. The room inside was

pitch dark, but she took me fearlessly by the hand and led me quickly through it, and along the passage, until we came to the cheerful lighted hall, where a great fire burned on the hearth. All traces of the soldiers' occupation had been swept away. But the room was empty.

She led me to the fire, and there in the full light, no longer a shadowy creature, but red-lipped, brilliant, throbbing with life and beauty, she stood opposite me—her eyes shining, her colour high, her breast heaving.

'Do I believe it?' she said in a thrilling voice. 'I will tell you. M. de Cocheforêt's hiding-place is in the hut behind the fern-stack, two furlongs beyond the village on the road to Auch. You know now what no one else knows, he and I and Madame excepted. You hold in your hands his life and my honour; and you know also, M. de Berault, whether I believe that tale.'

'My God!' I cried. And I stood looking at her until something of the horror in my eyes crept into hers, and she shuddered and stepped back from me.

"My God!" I cried.

'What is it? What is it?' she whispered, clasping her hands. And with all the colour gone suddenly from her cheeks she peered trembling into the corners and towards the door. 'There is no one here.'

I forced myself to speak, though I was trembling all over like a man in an ague. 'No, Mademoiselle, there is no one here,' I muttered. 'There is no one here.' And then I let my head fall on my breast, and I stood before her, the statue of despair. Had she felt a grain of suspicion, a grain of doubt, my bearing must have opened her eyes; but her mind was cast in so noble a mould that, having once thought ill of me and been converted, she could feel no doubt again. She must trust all in all. A little recovered from her fright, she stood looking at me in great wonder; and at last she had a thought—

'You are not well?' she said suddenly. 'It is your old wound, Monsieur. Now I have it?'

'Yes, Mademoiselle,' I muttered faintly, 'it is.'

'I will call Clon!' she cried impetuously. And then, with a sob: 'Ah! poor Clon! He is

gone. But there is still Louis. I will call him and he will get you something.'

She was gone from the room before I could stop her, and I stood leaning against the table, possessor at last of the secret which I had come so far to win; able in a moment to open the door and go out into the night, and make use of it—and yet the most unhappy of men. The sweat stood on my brow; my eyes wandered round the room; I turned towards the door, with some mad thought of flight—of flight from her, from the house, from everything; and I had actually taken a step towards this, when on the door, the outer door, there came a sudden hurried knocking which jarred every nerve in my body. I started, and stopped. I stood a moment in the middle of the floor gazing at the door, as at a ghost. Then, glad of action, glad of anything that might relieve the tension of my feelings, I strode to it and pulled it sharply open.

On the threshold, his flushed face lit up by the light behind me, stood one of the knaves whom I had brought with me to Auch. He had been

running, and panted heavily; but he had kept his wits, and the instant I appeared he grasped my sleeve.

'Ah! Monsieur, the very man!' he cried. 'Quick! come this instant, lose not a moment, and you may yet be first. They have the secret! The soldiers have found Monsieur!'

'Found him?' I echoed. 'M. de Cocheforêt?'

'No; but they know the place where he lies. It was found by accident. The Lieutenant was gathering his men when I came away. If we are quick, we may yet be first.'

'But the place?' I said.

'I could not hear,' he answered bluntly. 'We must hang on their skirts, and at the last moment strike in. It is the only way, Monsieur.'

The pair of pistols I had taken from the shock-headed man lay on a chest by the door. Without waiting for more I snatched them up and my hat, and joined him, and in a moment we were running down the garden. I looked back once before we passed the gate, and I saw the light streaming out through the door which I had left open; and I

fancied that for an instant a figure darkened the gap. But the fancy only strengthened the one single purpose, the iron resolve, which had taken possession of me and all my thoughts. I must be first; I must anticipate the Lieutenant; I must make the arrest myself. I must be first. And I ran on only the faster.

We were across the meadow and in the wood in a moment. There, instead of keeping along the common path, I boldly singled out—my senses seemed to be preternaturally keen — the smaller trail by which Clon had brought us. Along this I ran unfalteringly, avoiding logs and pitfalls as by instinct, and following all its turns and twists, until we came to the back of the inn, and could hear the murmur of subdued voices in the village street, the sharp low word of command, and the clink of weapons; and could see over and between the houses the dull glare of lanthorns and torches.

I grasped my man's arm, and crouched down listening. When I had heard enough, 'Where is your mate?' I said in his ear.

'With them,' he muttered.

'Then come,' I whispered rising. 'I have seen what I want. Let us go.'

But he caught me by the arm and detained me.

'You don't know the way,' he said. 'Steady, steady, Monsieur. You go too fast. They are just moving. Let us join them, and strike in when the time comes. We must let them guide us.'

'Fool!' I said, shaking off his hand. 'I tell you, I know where he is! I know where they are going. Come, and we will pluck the fruit while they are on the road to it.'

His only answer was an exclamation of surprise. At that moment the lights began to move. The Lieutenant was starting. The moon was not yet up, the sky was grey and cloudy; to advance where we were was to step into a wall of blackness. But we had lost too much time already, and I did not hesitate. Bidding my companion follow me and use his legs, I sprang through a low fence which rose before us; then stumbling blindly over some broken ground in the rear of the houses, I came with a fall or two to a little watercourse with steep sides. Through this I plunged recklessly and up

the farther side, and, breathless and panting, gained the road, beyond the village, and fifty yards in advance of the Lieutenant's troop.

They had only two lanthorns burning, and we were beyond the circle of light cast by these; while the steady tramp of so many footsteps covered the noise we made. We were in no danger of being noticed, and in a twinkling we turned our backs, and as fast as we could we ran down the road. Fortunately, they were thinking more of secrecy than speed, and in a minute we had doubled the distance between them and us. In two minutes their lights were mere sparks shining in the gloom behind us. We lost even the tramp of their feet. Then I began to look out and go more slowly, peering into the shadows on either side for the fernstack.

On one hand the hill rose steeply, on the other it fell away to the stream. On neither side was close wood, or my difficulties had been immensely increased; but scattered oak trees stood here and there among the bracken. This helped me, and presently, on the upper side, I came upon the dense

substance of the stack looming black against the lighter hill.

My heart beat fast, but it was no time for thought. Bidding the man in a whisper to follow me and be ready to back me up, I climbed the bank softly, and, with a pistol in my hand, felt my way to the rear of the stack, thinking to find a hut there, set against the fern, and M. Cocheforêt in it. But I found no hut. There was none ; and, moreover, it was so dark now we were off the road, that it came upon me suddenly, as I stood between the hill and the stack, that I had undertaken a very difficult thing. The hut behind the fern-stack. But how far behind? how far from it? The dark slope stretched above us, infinite, immeasurable, shrouded in night. To begin to climb it in search of a tiny hut, possibly well hidden and hard to find in daylight, seemed an endeavour as hopeless as to meet with the needle in the hay! And now while I stood, chilled and doubting, almost despairing, the steps of the troop in the road began to grow audible, began to come nearer.

'Well, Monsieur le Capitaine?' the man beside

me muttered—in wonder why I stood. 'Which way? or they will be before us yet.'

I tried to think, to reason it out; to consider where the hut should be; while the wind sighed through the oaks, and here and there I could hear an acorn fall. But the thing pressed too close on me; my thoughts would not be hurried, and at last I said at a venture,—

'Up the hill. Straight up from the stack.'

He did not demur, and we plunged at the ascent, knee-deep in bracken and furze, sweating at every pore with our exertions, and hearing the troop come every moment nearer on the road below. Doubtless they knew exactly whither to go! Forced to stop and take breath when we had scrambled up fifty yards or so, I saw their lanthorns shining like moving glow-worms; I could even hear the clink of steel. For all I could tell, the hut might be down there, and we be moving from it. But it was too late to go back now—they were close to the fern-stack; and in despair I turned to the hill again. A dozen steps and I stumbled. I rose and plunged on again; again stumbled.

Then I found that I was treading level earth. And—was it water I saw before me, below me? or some mirage of the sky?

Neither; and I gripped my fellow's arm, as he came abreast of me, and stopped him sharply. Below us in the middle of a steep hollow, a pit in the hill-side, a light shone out through some aperture and quivered on the mist, like the pale lamp of a moorland hobgoblin. It made itself visible, displaying nothing else; a wisp of light in the bottom of a black bowl. Yet my spirits rose with a great bound at sight of it; for I knew that I had stumbled on the place I sought.

In the common run of things I should have weighed my next step carefully, and gone about it slowly. But here was no place for thought, nor room for delay; and I slid down the side of the hollow on the instant, and the moment my feet touched the bottom sprang to the door of the little hut, whence the light issued. A stone turned under my feet in my rush, and I fell on my knees on the threshold; but the fall only brought my face to a level with the face of the man

who lay inside on a bed of fern. He had been reading. Startled by the sound I made, he dropped his book, and in a flash stretched out his hand for a weapon. But the muzzle of my pistol covered him, he was not in a posture from which he could spring, and at a sharp word from me he dropped his hand; the tigerish glare which flickered for an instant in his eyes gave place to a languid smile, and he shrugged his shoulders.

'*Eh bien!*' he said with marvellous composure. 'Taken at last! Well, I was tired of it.'

'You are my prisoner, M. de Cocheforêt,' I answered. 'Move a hand and I kill you. But you have still a choice.'

'Truly?' he said, raising his eyebrows.

'Yes. My orders are to take you to Paris alive or dead. Give me your parole that you will make no attempt to escape, and you shall go thither at your ease and as a gentleman. Refuse, and I shall disarm and bind you, and you go as a prisoner.'

'What force have you?' he asked curtly. He still lay on his elbow, his cloak covering him, the

little Marot in which he had been reading close to his hand. But his quick black eyes, which looked the keener for the pallor and thinness of his face, roved ceaselessly over me, probed the darkness behind me, took note of everything.

'Enough to compel you, Monsieur,' I replied sternly; 'but that is not all. There are thirty dragoons coming up the hill to secure you, and they will make you no such offer. Surrender to me before they come, and give me your parole, and I will do all I can for your comfort. Delay, and you must fall into their hands. There can be no escape.'

'You will take my word?' he said slowly.

'Give it, and you may keep your pistols, M. de Cocheforêt.'

'Tell me at least that you are not alone.'

'I am not alone.'

'Then I give it,' he said with a sigh. 'And for Heaven's sake get me something to eat and a bed. I am tired of this pig-sty. *Mon Dieu!* it is a fortnight since I slept between sheets.'

'You shall sleep to-night in your own house, if

you please,' I answered hurriedly. 'But here they come. Be good enough to stay where you are for a moment, and I will meet them.'

I stepped out into the darkness, just as the Lieutenant, after posting his men round the hollow, slid down with a couple of sergeants to make the arrest. The place round the open door was pitch-dark. He had not espied my man, who had lodged himself in the deepest shadow of the hut, and when he saw me come out across the light he took me for Cocheforêt. In a twinkling he thrust a pistol into my face, and cried triumphantly,—'You are my prisoner!' while one of the sergeants raised a lanthorn and threw its light into my eyes.

'What folly is this?' I said savagely.

The Lieutenant's jaw fell, and he stood for a moment paralysed with astonishment. Less than an hour before he had left me at the Château. Thence he had come hither with the briefest delay; yet he found me here before him. He swore fearfully, his face black, his moustachios stiff with rage.

'What is this? What is it?' he cried. 'Where is the man?'

'What man?' I said.

'This Cocheforêt!' he roared, carried away by his passion. 'Don't lie to me! He is here, and I will have him!'

'You are too late,' I said, watching him heedfully. M. de Cocheforêt is here, but he has already surrendered to me, and is my prisoner.'

'Your prisoner?'

'Certainly!' I answered, facing the man with all the harshness I could muster. 'I have arrested him by virtue of the Cardinal's commission granted to me. And by virtue of the same I shall keep him.'

'You will keep him?'

'I shall!'

He stared at me for a moment, utterly aghast; the picture of defeat. Then on a sudden I saw his face lighten with a new idea.

'It is a d—d ruse!' he shouted, brandishing his pistol like a madman. 'It is a cheat and a fraud! By God! you have no commission! I

see through it! I see through it all! You have come here, and you have hocussed us! You are of their side, and this is your last shift to save him!'

'What folly is this?' I said contemptuously.

'No folly at all,' he answered, perfect conviction in his tone. 'You have played upon us. You have fooled us. But I see through it now. An hour ago I exposed you to that fine Madame at the house there, and I thought it a marvel that she did not believe me. I thought it a marvel that she did not see through you, when you stood there before her, confounded, tongue-tied, a rogue convicted. But I understand now. She knew you. She was in the plot, and you were in the plot, and I, who thought that I was opening her eyes, was the only one fooled. But it is my turn now. You have played a bold part and a clever one,' he continued, a sinister light in his little eyes, 'and I congratulate you. But it is at an end now, Monsieur. You took us in finely with your talk of Monseigneur, and his commission and your commission, and the rest. But I am

not to be blinded any longer—or bullied. You have arrested him, have you? *You* have arrested him. Well, by G—, I shall arrest him, and I shall arrest you too.'

'You are mad!' I said, staggered as much by this new view of the matter as by his perfect certainty. 'Mad, Lieutenant.'

'I was,' he snarled. 'But I am sane now. I was mad when you imposed upon us, when you persuaded me to think that you were fooling the women to get the secret out of them, while all the time you were sheltering them, protecting them, aiding them, and hiding him—then I was mad. But not now. However, I ask your pardon. I thought you the cleverest sneak and the dirtiest hound Heaven ever made. I find you were cleverer than I thought, and an honest traitor. Your pardon.'

One of the men, who stood about the rim of the bowl above us, laughed. I looked at the Lieutenant and could willingly have killed him.

'*Mon Dieu!*' I said—and I was so furious in my turn that I could scarcely speak. 'Do you

say that I am an impostor—that I do not hold the Cardinal's commission?'

'I do say that,' he answered coolly.

'And that I belong to the rebel party?'

'I do,' he replied in the same tone. 'In fact,' with a grin, 'I say that you are an honest man on the wrong side, M. de Berault. And you say that you are a scoundrel on the right. The advantage, however, is with me, and I shall back my opinion by arresting you.'

A ripple of coarse laughter ran round the hollow. The sergeant who held the lanthorn grinned, and a trooper at a distance called out of the darkness '*A bon chat bon rat!*' This brought a fresh burst of laughter, while I stood speechless, confounded by the stubbornness, the crassness, the insolence of the man. 'You fool!' I cried at last, 'you fool!' And then M. de Cocheforêt, who had come out of the hut and taken his stand at my elbow, interrupted me.

'Pardon me one moment,' he said, airily, looking at the Lieutenant with raised eyebrows

and pointing to me with his thumb, 'but I am puzzled between you. This gentleman's name? Is it de Berault or de Barthe?'

'I am M. de Berault,' I said, brusquely, answering for myself.

'Of Paris?'

'Yes, Monsieur, of Paris.'

'You are not, then, the gentleman who has been honouring my poor house with his presence?'

'Oh, yes!' the Lieutenant struck in, grinning. 'He is that gentleman, too.'

'But I thought—I understood that that was M. de Barthe!'

'I am M. de Barthe, also,' I retorted impatiently. 'What of that, Monsieur? It was my mother's name. I took it when I came down here.'

'To—er—to arrest me, may I ask?'

'Yes,' I said, doggedly; 'to arrest you. What of that?'

'Nothing,' he replied slowly and with a steady look at me—a look I could not meet. 'Except that, had I known this before, M. de Berault,

I should have thought longer before I surrendered to you.'

The Lieutenant laughed, and I felt my cheek burn; but I affected to see nothing, and turned to him again. 'Now, Monsieur,' I said, 'are you satisfied?'

'No,' he answered, 'I am not! You two may have rehearsed this pretty scene a dozen times. The word, it seems to me, is—Quick march, back to quarters.'

At length I found myself driven to play my last card; much against my will.

'Not so,' I said. 'I have my commission.'

'Produce it!' he replied incredulously.

'Do you think that I carry it with me?' I cried in scorn. 'Do you think that when I came here, alone, and not with fifty dragoons at my back, I carried the Cardinal's seal in my pocket for the first lackey to find. But you shall have it. Where is that knave of mine?'

The words were scarcely out of my mouth before a ready hand thrust a paper into my

fingers. I opened it slowly, glanced at it, and amid a pause of surprise gave it to the Lieutenant. He looked for a moment confounded. Then, with a last instinct of suspicion, he bade the sergeant hold up the lanthorn; and by its light he proceeded to spell through the document.

'Umph!' he ejaculated with an ugly look when he had come to the end, 'I see.' And he read it aloud :—

> '*By these presents, I command and empower Gilles de Berault, sieur de Berault, to seek for, hold, arrest, and deliver to the Governor of the Bastille the body of Henri de Cocheforêt, and to do all such acts and things as shall be necessary to effect such arrest and delivery, for which these shall be his warrant.*
>
> (*Signed*) THE CARDINAL DE RICHELIEU.'

When he had done—he read the signature with a peculiar intonation—someone said softly, '*Vive le Roi!*' and there was a moment's silence. The sergeant lowered his lanthorn. 'Is

it enough?' I said hoarsely, glaring from face to face.

The Lieutenant bowed stiffly.

'For me?' he said. 'Quite, Monsieur. I beg your pardon again. I find that my first impressions were the correct ones. Sergeant! give the gentleman his papers!' and, turning his shoulder rudely, he tossed the commission to the sergeant, who gave it to me, grinning.

I knew that the clown would not fight, and he had his men round him; and I had no choice but to swallow the insult. I put the paper in my breast, with as much indifference as I could assume; and as I did so, he gave a sharp order. The troopers began to form on the edge above; the men who had descended to climb the bank again.

As the group behind him began to open and melt away, I caught sight of a white robe in the middle of it. The next moment, appearing with a suddenness which was like a blow on the cheek to me, Mademoiselle de Cocheforêt glided forward towards me. She had a

hood on her head, drawn low; and for a moment I could not see her face. I forgot her brother's presence at my elbow, I forgot other things, and, from habit and impulse rather than calculation, I took a step forward to meet her; though my tongue cleaved to the roof of my mouth, and I was dumb and trembling.

But she recoiled — with such a look of white hate, of staring, frozen-eyed abhorrence, that I stepped back as if she had indeed struck me. It did not need the words which accompanied the look—the '*Do not touch me!*' which she hissed at me as she drew her skirts together—to drive me to the farther edge of the hollow; where I stood with clenched teeth, and nails driven into the flesh, while she hung, sobbing tearless sobs, on her brother's neck.

CHAPTER XII

THE ROAD TO PARIS

I REMEMBER hearing Marshal Bassompierre, who, of all the men within my knowledge, had the widest experience, say that not dangers but discomforts prove a man and show what he is; and that the worst sores in life are caused by crumpled rose-leaves and not by thorns.

I am inclined to think him right, for I remember that when I came from my room on the morning after the arrest, and found hall and parlour and passage empty, and all the common rooms of the house deserted, and no meal laid; and when I divined anew from this discovery the feeling of the house towards me—however natural and to be expected—I remember that I felt as sharp a pang as when, the night before, I had had to face discovery and open rage and scorn. I

stood in the silent, empty parlour, and looked on the familiar things with a sense of desolation, of something lost and gone, which I could not understand. The morning was grey and cloudy, the air sharp, a shower was falling. The rose-bushes outside swayed in the wind, and inside, where I could remember the hot sunshine lying on floor and table, the rain beat in and stained the boards. The inner door flapped and creaked on its hinges. I thought of other days and of meals I had taken there, and of the scent of flowers; and I fled to the hall in despair.

But here, too, were no signs of life or company, no comfort, no attendance. The ashes of the logs, by whose blaze Mademoiselle had told me the secret, lay on the hearth white and cold—fit emblem of the change that had taken place; and now and then a drop of moisture, sliding down the great chimney, pattered among them. The main door stood open, as if the house had no longer anything to guard. The only living thing to be seen was a hound which roamed about restlessly, now gazing at the empty hearth,

now lying down with pricked ears and watchful eyes. Some leaves, which had been blown in by the wind, rustled in a corner.

I went out moodily into the garden and wandered down one path and up another, looking at the dripping woods, and remembering things, until I came to the stone seat. On it, against the wall, trickling with raindrops, and with a dead leaf half filling its narrow neck, stood the pitcher of food. I thought how much had happened since Mademoiselle took her hand from it and the sergeant's lanthorn disclosed it to me; and, sighing grimly, I went in again through the parlour door.

A woman was on her knees, on the hearth kindling the belated fire. She had her back to me, and I stood a moment looking at her doubtfully, wondering how she would bear herself and what she would say to me. Then she turned, and I started back, crying out her name in horror—for it was Madame! Madame de Cocheforêt!

She was plainly dressed, and her childish face was wan and piteous with weeping; but either

the night had worn out her passion and drained her tears, or some great exigency had given her temporary calmness, for she was perfectly composed. She shivered as her eyes met mine, and she blinked as if a bright light had been suddenly thrust before her; but that was all, and she turned again to her task without speaking.

Madame! Madame!' I cried in a frenzy of distress. 'What is this?'

'The servants would not do it,' she answered in a low but steady voice. 'You are still our guest, Monsieur.'

'But I cannot suffer it!' I cried. 'Madame de Cocheforêt, I will not—'

She raised her hand with a strange patient expression in her face.

'Hush! please,' she said. 'Hush! you trouble me.'

The fire blazed up as she spoke, and she rose slowly from it, and with a lingering look at it went out, leaving me to stand and stare and listen in the middle of the floor. Presently I heard her coming back along the passage, and

she entered bearing a tray with wine and meat and bread. She set it down on the table, and with the same wan face, trembling always on the verge of tears, she began to lay out the things. The glasses clinked fitfully against the plates as she handled them; the knives jarred with one another. And I stood by, trembling myself; and endured this strange kind of penance.

She signed to me at last to sit down; and she went herself, and stood in the garden doorway with her back to me. I obeyed. I sat down. But though I had eaten nothing since the afternoon of the day before, I could not swallow. I fumbled with my knife, and drank; and grew hot and angry at this farce; and then looked through the window at the dripping bushes, and the rain and the distant sundial—and grew cold again.

Suddenly she turned round and came to my side.

'You do not eat,' she said.

I threw down my knife, and sprang up in a frenzy of passion. '*Mon Dieu!* Madame,' I cried. 'Do you think that I have *no* heart?'

And then in a moment I knew what I had done, what a folly I had committed. For in a moment she was on her knees on the floor, clasping my knees, pressing her wet cheeks to my rough clothes, crying to me for mercy—for life! life! his life! Oh, it was horrible! It was horrible to hear her gasping voice, to see her fair hair falling over my mud-stained boots, to mark her slender little form convulsed with sobs, to feel that it was a woman, a gentlewoman, who thus abased herself at my feet!

'Oh, Madame! Madame!' I cried in my pain. 'I beg you to rise. Rise, or I must go!'

'His life! only his life!' she moaned passionately. 'What had he done to you—that you should hunt him down? what have we done to you that you should slay us? Oh! have mercy! Have mercy! Let him go, and we will pray for you, I and my sister will pray for you, every morning and night of our lives.'

I was in terror lest someone should come and see her lying there, and I stooped and tried to raise her. But she only sank the lower, until her tender

little hands touched the rowels of my spurs. I dared not move. At last I took a sudden resolution.

'Listen, then, Madame!' I said almost sternly, 'if you will not rise. You forget everything, both how I stand, and how small my power is! You forget that if I were to release your husband to-day he would be seized within the hour by those who are still in the village and who are watching every road—who have not ceased to suspect my movements and my intentions. You forget, I say, my circumstances—'

She cut me short on that word. She sprang to her feet and faced me. One moment more and I should have said something to the purpose. But at that word she stood before me, white, breathless, dishevelled, struggling for speech.

'Oh, yes, yes!' she panted eagerly. 'I know—I know!' And she thrust her hand into her bosom and plucked something out and gave it to me—forced it upon me. 'I know—I know!' she said again. 'Take it, and God reward you, Monsieur! God reward you! We give it freely—freely and thankfully!'

I stood and looked at her and it; and slowly I froze. She had given me the packet—the packet I had restored to Mademoiselle—the parcel of jewels. I weighed it in my hands, and my heart grew hard again, for I knew that this was Mademoiselle's doing; that it was she who, mistrusting the effect of Madame's tears and prayers, had armed her with this last weapon—this dirty bribe. I flung it down on the table among the plates.

'Madame!' I cried ruthlessly, all my pity changed to anger, 'you mistake me altogether! I have heard hard words enough in the last twenty-four hours, and I know what you think of me! But you have yet to learn that I have never done one thing. I have never turned traitor to the hand that employed me, nor sold my own side! When I do so for a treasure ten times the worth of that, may my hand rot off!'

She sank on a seat with a moan of despair; and precisely at that moment M. de Cocheforêt opened the door and came in. Over his shoulder I had a glimpse of Mademoiselle's proud face, a little whiter

than of yore, with dark marks under the eyes, but like Satan's for coldness.

'What is this?' he said, frowning, as his eyes lighted on Madame.

'It is—that we start at eleven o'clock, Monsieur,' I answered, bowing curtly. And I went out by the other door.

. . . . . .

That I might not be present at their parting I remained in the garden until the hour I had appointed was well past; and then, without entering the house, I went to the stable entrance. Here I found all in readiness, the two troopers whose company I had requisitioned as far as Auch, already in the saddle, my own two knaves waiting with my sorrel and M. de Cocheforêt's chestnut. Another horse was being led up and down by Louis, and, alas! my heart moved at the sight, for it bore a lady's saddle. We were to have company then. Was it Madame who meant to come with us, or Mademoiselle? And how far? To Auch?

I suppose that they had set some kind of a watch on me, for as I walked up M. de Cocheforêt

and his sister came out of the house; he with a pale face and bright eyes, and a twitching visible in his cheek—though he still affected a jaunty bearing; she wearing a black mask.

'Mademoiselle accompanies us?' I said formally.

'With your permission, Monsieur,' he answered with bitter politeness. But I saw that he was choking with emotion; he had just parted from his wife, and I turned away.

When we were all mounted he looked at me.

'Perhaps—as you have my parole, you will permit me to ride alone?' he said with a little hesitation. 'And—'

'Without me!' I rejoined keenly. 'Assuredly, so far as is possible.'

Accordingly I directed the troopers to ride before him, keeping out of earshot, while my two men followed him at a little distance with their carabines on their knees. Last of all, I rode myself with my eyes open and a pistol loose in my holster. M. de Cocheforêt muttered a sneer at so many precautions and the mountain made of his request; but I had not done so much and come so far, I had not

faced scorn and insults to be cheated of my prize at last; and aware that until we were beyond Auch there must be hourly and pressing danger of a rescue, I was determined that he who should wrest my prisoner from me should pay dearly for it. Only pride, and, perhaps, in a degree also, appetite for a fight, had prevented me borrowing ten troopers instead of two.

As he went I looked with a lingering eye and many memories at the little bridge, the narrow woodland path, the first roofs of the village; all now familiar, all seen for the last time. Up the brook a party of soldiers were dragging for the captain's body. A furlong farther on, a cottage, burned by some carelessness in the night, lay a heap of black ashes. Louis ran beside us weeping; the last brown leaves fluttered down in showers. And between my eyes and all, the slow steady rain fell and fell. And so I left Cocheforêt.

Louis went with us to a point a mile beyond the village, and there stood and saw us go, cursing me furiously as I passed. Looking back when we had ridden on, I still saw him stand-

ing, and after a moment's hesitation I rode back to him.

'Listen, fool!' I said, cutting him short in the midst of his mowing and snarling, 'and give this message to your mistress. Tell her from me that it will be with her husband as it was with M. de Regnier, when he fell into the hands of his enemy —no better and no worse.'

'You want to kill her, too, I suppose?' he answered glowering at me.

'No, fool, I want to save her,' I retorted wrathfully. 'Tell her that, just that and no more, and you will see the result.'

'I shall not,' he said sullenly. 'A message from you indeed!' And he spat on the ground.

'Then on your head be it,' I answered solemnly. And I turned my horse's head and galloped fast after the others. But I felt sure that he would report what I had said, if it were only out of curiosity; and it would be strange if Madame, a gentlewoman of the south, bred among old family traditions, did not understand the reference.

And so we began our journey; sadly, under

dripping trees and a leaden sky. The country we had to traverse was the same I had trodden on the last day of my march southwards, but the passage of a month had changed the face of everything. Green dells, where springs welling out of the chalk had once made of the leafy bottom a fairies' home, strewn with delicate ferns and hung with mosses, were now swamps into which our horses sank to the fetlock. Sunny brows, whence I had viewed the champaign and traced my forward path, had become bare, wind-swept ridges. The beech woods that had glowed with ruddy light were naked now; mere black trunks and rigid arms pointing to heaven. An earthy smell filled the air; a hundred paces away a wall of mist closed the view. We plodded on sadly up hill and down hill, now fording brooks, already stained with flood-water, now crossing barren heaths. But up hill or down hill, whatever the outlook, I was never permitted to forget that I was the jailor, the ogre, the villain; that I, riding behind in my loneliness, was the blight on all—the death-spot. True, I was behind the

others—I escaped their eyes. But there was not a line of Mademoiselle's figure that did not speak scorn to me; not a turn of head that did not seem to say, 'Oh, God, that such a thing should breathe.'

I had only speech with her once during the day, and that was on the last ridge before we went down into the valley to climb up again to Auch. The rain had ceased; the sun, near its setting, shone faintly; for a few moments we stood on the brow and looked southwards while we breathed the horses. The mist lay like a pall on the country we had traversed; but beyond and above it, gleaming pearl-like in the level rays, the line of the mountains stood up like a land of enchantment, soft, radiant, wonderful!—or like one of those castles on the Hill of Glass of which the old romances tell us. I forgot for an instant how we were placed, and I cried to my neighbour that it was the fairest pageant I had ever seen.

She—it was Mademoiselle, and she had taken off her mask—cast one look at me in answer;

only one, but it conveyed disgust and loathing so unspeakable that scorn beside them would have been a gift. I reined in my horse as if she had struck me, and felt myself go first hot and then cold under her eyes. Then she looked another way.

But I did not forget the lesson ; and after that I avoided her more sedulously than before. We lay that night at Auch, and I gave M. de Cocheforêt the utmost liberty, even permitting him to go out and return at his will. In the morning, believing that on the farther side of Auch we ran little risk of attack, I dismissed the two dragoons, and an hour after sunrise we set out again. The day was dry and cold, the weather more promising. I proposed to go by way of Lectoure, crossing the Garonne at Agen ; and I thought that, with roads continually improving as we moved northwards, we should be able to make good progress before night. My two men rode first, I came last by myself.

Our way lay down the valley of the Gers, under poplars and by long rows of willows, and presently

the sun came out and warmed us. Unfortunately the rain of the day before had swollen the brooks which crossed our path, and we more than once had a difficulty in fording them. Noon found us little more than half way to Lectoure, and I was growing each minute more impatient when our road, which had for a little while left the river bank, dropped down to it again, and I saw before us another crossing, half ford half slough. My men tried it gingerly and gave back and tried it again in another place; and finally, just as Mademoiselle and her brother came up to them, floundered through and sprang slantwise up the farther bank.

The delay had been long enough to bring me, with no good will of my own, close upon the Cocheforêts. Mademoiselle's horse made a little business of the place, and in the result we entered the water almost together; and I crossed close on her heels. The bank on either side was steep; while crossing we could see neither before nor behind. But at the moment I thought nothing of this nor of her delay; and I was following her

quite at my leisure and picking my way, when the sudden report of a carbine, a second report, and a yell of alarm in front thrilled me through.

On the instant, while the sound was still in my ears, I saw it all. Like a hot iron piercing my brain the truth flashed into my mind. We were attacked! We were attacked, and I was here helpless in this pit, this trap! The loss of a second while I fumbled here, Mademoiselle's horse barring the way, might be fatal.

There was but one way. I turned my horse straight at the steep bank, and he breasted it. One moment he hung as if he must fall back. Then, with a snort of terror and a desperate bound, he topped it, and gained the level, trembling and snorting.

Seventy paces away on the road lay one of my men. He had fallen, horse and man, and lay still. Near him, with his back against a bank. stood his fellow, on foot, pressed by four horsemen, and shouting. As my eye lighted on the scene he let fly with a carbine, and dropped one.

I clutched a pistol from my holster and seized

my horse by the head. I might save the man yet. I shouted to him to encourage him, and was driving in my spurs to second my voice, when a sudden vicious blow, swift and unexpected, struck the pistol from my hand.

I made a snatch at it as it fell, but missed it, and before I could recover myself, Mademoiselle thrust her horse furiously against mine, and with her riding-whip lashed the sorrel across the ears. As the horse reared up madly, I had a glimpse of her eyes flashing hate through her mask; of her hand again uplifted; the next moment, I was down in the road, ingloriously unhorsed, the sorrel was galloping away, and her horse, scared in its turn, was plunging unmanageably a score of paces from me.

But for that I think that she would have trampled on me. As it was, I was free to rise, and draw, and in a twinkling was running towards the fighters. All had happened in a few seconds. My man was still defending himself, the smoke of the carbine had scarcely risen. I sprang across a fallen tree that intervened, and at the same moment two of the men detached themselves and

rode to meet me. One, whom I took be the leader, was masked. He came furiously at me to ride me down, but I leaped aside nimbly, and, evading him, rushed at the other, and scaring his horse, so that he dropped his point, cut him across the shoulder, before he could guard himself. He plunged away, cursing and trying to hold in his horse, and I turned to meet the masked man.

'You villain!' he cried, riding at me again. This time he manœuvred his horse so skilfully that I was hard put to it to prevent him knocking me down; while I could not with all my efforts reach him to hurt him. 'Surrender, will you?' he cried, 'you bloodhound!'

I wounded him slightly in the knee for answer; before I could do more his companion came back, and the two set upon me, slashing at my head so furiously and towering above me with so great an advantage that it was all I could do to guard it. I was soon glad to fall back against the bank. In this sort of conflict my rapier would have been of little use, but fortunately I had armed myself before I left Paris with a cut-and-thrust sword for the road;

"YOU VILLAIN!" HE CRIED, RIDING AT ME AGAIN.

and though my mastery of the weapon was not on a par with my rapier play, I was able to fend off their cuts, and by an occasional prick keep the horses at a distance. Still, they swore and cut at me; and it was trying work. A little delay might enable the other man to come to their help, or Mademoiselle, for all I knew, might shoot me with my own pistol. I was unfeignedly glad when a lucky parade sent the masked man's sword flying across the road. On that he pushed his horse recklessly at me, spurring it without mercy; but the animal, which I had several times touched, reared up instead, and threw him at the very moment that I wounded his companion a second time in the arm, and made him give back

The scene was now changed. The man in the mask staggered to his feet, and felt stupidly for a pistol. But he could not find one, and he was in no state to use it if he had. He reeled helplessly to the bank and leaned against it. The man I had wounded was in scarcely better condition. He retreated before me, but in a moment, losing courage, let drop his sword, and, wheeling round, cantered

off, clinging to his pommel. There remained only the fellow engaged with my man, and I turned to see how they were getting on. They were standing to take breath, so I ran towards them ; but on seeing me coming, this rascal, too, whipped round his horse and disappeared in the wood, and left us victors.

The first thing I did—and I remember it to this day with pleasure—was to plunge my hand into my pocket, take out half of all the money I had in the world, and press it on the man who had fought for me so stoutly. In my joy I could have kissed him ! It was not only that I had escaped defeat by the skin of my teeth—and his good sword ; but I knew, and felt, and thrilled with the knowledge, that the fight had, in a sense, redeemed my character. He was wounded in two places, and I had a scratch or two, and had lost my horse ; and my other poor fellow was dead as a herring. But, speaking for myself, I would have spent half the blood in my body to purchase the feeling with which I turned back to speak to M. de Cocheforêt and his sister. Mademoiselle had dismounted,

and with her face averted and her mask pushed on one side, was openly weeping. Her brother, who had faithfully kept his place by the ford from the beginning of the fight to the end, met me with raised eyebrows and a peculiar smile.

'Acknowledge my virtue,' he said airily. 'I am here, M. de Berault; which is more than can be said of the two gentlemen who have just ridden off.'

'Yes,' I answered with a touch of bitterness. 'I wish that they had not shot my poor man before they went.'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'They were my friends,' he said. 'You must not expect me to blame them. But that is not all, M. de Berault.'

'No,' I said, wiping my sword. 'There is this gentleman in the mask.' And I turned to go towards him.

'M. de Berault!' Cocheforêt called after me, his tone strained and abrupt.

I stood. 'Pardon?' I said, turning.

'That gentleman?' he said, hesitating and look

ing at me doubtfully. 'Have you considered what will happen to him if you give him up to the authorities?'

'Who is he?' I asked sharply.

'That is rather a delicate question,' he answered frowning.

'Not for me,' I replied brutally, 'since he is in my power. If he will take off his mask I shall know better what I intend to do with him.'

The stranger had lost his hat in his fall, and his fair hair, stained with dust, hung in curls on his shoulders. He was a tall man, of a slender, handsome presence, and, though his dress was plain and almost rough, I espied a splendid jewel on his hand, and fancied that I detected other signs of high quality. He still lay against the bank in a half-swooning condition, and seemed unconscious of my scrutiny.

'Should I know him if he unmasked?' I said suddenly, a new idea in my head.

'You would,' M. de Cocheforêt answered.

'And?'

'It would be bad for everyone.'

'Ho! ho!' I replied softly, looking hard first at my old prisoner, and then at my new one. 'Then —what do you wish me to do?'

'Leave him here!' M. de Cocheforêt answered, his face flushed, the pulse in his cheek beating.

I had known him for a man of perfect honour before, and trusted him. But this evident earnest anxiety on behalf of his friend touched me not a little. Besides, I knew that I was treading on slippery ground: that it behoved me to be careful.

'I will do it,' I said after a moment's reflection. 'He will play me no tricks, I suppose? A letter of—'

'*Mon Dieu*, no! He will understand,' Cocheforêt answered eagerly. 'You will not repent it. Let us be going.'

'Well, but my horse?' I said, somewhat taken aback by this extreme haste. 'How am I to—'

'We shall overtake it,' he assured me. 'It will have kept the road. Lectoure is no more than a league from here, and we can give orders there to have these two fetched and buried.'

I had nothing to gain by demurring, and so, after another word or two, it was arranged. We picked up what we had dropped, M. de Cocheforêt helped his sister to mount, and within five minutes we were gone. Casting a glance back from the skirts of the wood I fancied that I saw the masked man straighten himself and turn to look after us, but the leaves were beginning to intervene, the distance may have cheated me. And yet I was not indisposed to think the unknown a trifle more observant, and a little less seriously hurt, than he seemed.

CHAPTER XII

AT THE FINGER-POST

THROUGH all, it will have been noticed, Mademoiselle had not spoken to me, nor said one word, good or bad. She had played her part grimly, had taken defeat in silence if with tears, had tried neither prayer nor defence nor apology. And the fact that the fight was now over, and the scene left behind, made no difference in her conduct. She kept her face studiously turned from me, and affected to ignore my presence. I caught my horse feeding by the roadside, a furlong forward, and mounted and fell into place behind the two, as in the morning. And just as we had plodded on then in silence we plodded on now; almost as if nothing had happened; while I wondered at the unfathomable ways of women,

and marvelled that she could take part in such an incident and remain unchanged.

Yet, though she strove to hide it, it had made a change in her. Though her mask served her well it could not entirely hide her emotions; and by-and-by I marked that her head drooped, that she rode listlessly, that the lines of her figure were altered. I noticed that she had flung away, or furtively dropped, her riding-whip; and I began to understand that, far from the fight having set me in my former place, to the old hatred of me were now added shame and vexation on her own account; shame that she had so lowered herself, even to save her brother, vexation that defeat had been her only reward.

Of this I saw a sign at Lectoure, where the inn had but one common room and we must all dine in company. I secured for them a table by the fire, and leaving them standing by it, retired myself to a smaller one near the door. There were no other guests; which made the separation between us more marked. M. de Cocheforêt seemed to feel this. He shrugged his shoulders and looked

across the room at me with a smile half sad half comical. But Mademoiselle was implacable. She had taken off her mask, and her face was like stone. Once, only once during the meal, I saw a change come over her. She coloured, I suppose at her thoughts, until her face flamed from brow to chin. I watched the blush spread and spread; and then she slowly and proudly turned her shoulder to me and looked through the window at the shabby street.

I suppose that she and her brother had both built on this attempt, which must have been arranged at Auch. For when we went on in the afternoon, I marked a change in them. They rode like people resigned to the worst. The grey realities of the position, the dreary future began to hang like a mist before their eyes, began to tinge the landscape with sadness, robbed even the sunset of its colours. With each hour Monsieur's spirits flagged and his speech became less frequent; until presently when the light was nearly gone and the dusk was round us the brother and sister rode hand in hand, silent, gloomy, one at least of them

weeping. The cold shadow of the Cardinal, of Paris, of the scaffold fell on them, and chilled them. As the mountains which they had known all their lives sank and faded behind us, and we entered on the wide, low valley of the Garonne, their hopes sank and faded also — sank to the dead level of despair Surrounded by guards, a mark for curious glances, with pride for a companion, M. de Cocheforêt could have borne himself bravely; doubtless would bear himself bravely still when the end came. But almost alone, moving forward through the grey evening to a prison, with so many measured days before him, and nothing to exhilarate or anger—in this condition it was little wonder if he felt, and betrayed that he felt, the blood run slow in his veins; if he thought more of the weeping wife and ruined home which he had left behind him than of the cause in which he had spent himself.

But God knows, they had no monopoly of gloom. I felt almost as sad myself. Long before sunset the flush of triumph, the heat of battle, which had warmed my heart at noon, were gone,

giving place to a chill dissatisfaction, a nausea, a despondency such as I have known follow a long night at the tables. Hitherto there had been difficulties to be overcome, risks to be run, doubts about the end, Now the end was certain and very near; so near that it filled all the prospect. One hour of triumph I might have, and would have, and I hugged the thought of it as a gambler hugs his last stake, planning the place and time and mode, and trying to occupy myself wholly with it. But the price? Alas! that too would intrude itself, and more frequently as the evening waned; so that as I marked this or that thing by the road, which I could recall passing on my journey south with thoughts so different, with plans that now seemed so very, very old, I asked myself grimly if this were really I; if this were Gil de Berault, known at Zaton's, *premier joueur*, or some Don Quichotte from Castille, tilting at windmills and taking barbers' bowls for gold.

We reached Agen very late that evening, after groping our way through a by-road near the river, set with holes and willow-stools and frog-spawn—

a place no better than a slough; so that after it the great fires and lights at the Blue Maid seemed like a glimpse of a new world, and in a twinkling put something of life and spirits into two at least of us. There was queer talk round the hearth here, of doings in Paris, of a stir against the Cardinal with the Queen-mother at bottom, and of grounded expectations that something might this time come of it. But the landlord pooh-poohed the idea; and I more than agreed with him. Even M. de Cocheforêt, who was at first inclined to build on it, gave up hope when he heard that it came only by way of Montauban; whence—since its reduction the year before—all sort of *canards* against the Cardinal were always on the wing.

'They kill him about once a month,' our host said with a grin. 'Sometimes it is *Monsieur* is to prove a match for him, sometimes *César Monsieur*—the Duke of Vendôme, you understand—and sometimes the Queen-mother. But since M. de Chalais and the Marshal made a mess of it and paid forfeit, I pin my faith to his Eminence—that is his new title, they tell me.'

'Things are quiet round here?' I asked.

'Perfectly. Since the Languedoc business came to an end, all goes well,' he answered.

Mademoiselle had retired on our arrival, so that her brother and I were for a hour or two this evening thrown together. I left him at liberty to separate himself from me if he pleased, but he did not use the opportunity. A kind of comradeship, rendered piquant by our peculiar relations, had begun to spring up between us. He seemed to take an odd pleasure in my company, more than once rallied me on my post of jailor, would ask humorously if he might do this or that; and once even inquired what I should do if he broke his parole.

'Or take it this way,' he continued flippantly. 'Suppose I had struck you in the back this evening in that cursed swamp by the river, M. de Berault? What then! *Pardieu*, I am astonished at myself that I did not do it. I could have been in Montauban within twenty-four hours, and found fifty hiding-places and no one the wiser.'

'Except your sister,' I said quietly.

He made a wry face. 'Yes,' he said, 'I am afraid that I must have stabbed her too, to preserve my self-respect. You are right.' And he fell into a reverie which held him for a few minutes. Then I found him looking at me with a kind of frank perplexity that invited question.

'What is it?' I said.

'You have fought a great many duels?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Did you ever strike a foul blow in one?'

'Never,' I answered. 'Why do you ask?'

'Well, because—I wanted to confirm an impression. To be frank, M. de Berault, I seem to see in you two men.'

'Two men?'

'Yes, two men. One, the man who captured me; the other, the man who let my friend go free to-day.'

'It surprised you that I let him go? That was prudence, M. de Cocheforêt,' I replied. 'I am an old gambler. I know when the stakes are too high for me. The man who caught a lion in his wolf-pit had no great catch.'

'No, that is true,' he answered smiling. 'And yet—I find two men in your skin.'

'I daresay that there are two in most men's skins,' I answered with a sigh. 'But not always together. Sometimes one is there, and sometimes the other.'

'How does the one like taking up the other's work?' he asked keenly.

I shrugged my shoulders. 'That is as may be,' I said. 'You do not take an estate without the debts.'

He did not answer for a moment, and I fancied that his thoughts had reverted to his own case. But on a sudden he looked at me again. 'Will you answer a question, M. de Berault?' he said winningly.

'Perhaps,' I replied.

'Then tell me—it is a tale I am sure worth the telling. What was it that, in a very evil hour for me, sent you in search of me?'

'My Lord Cardinal,' I answered.

'I did not ask who,' he replied drily. 'I asked, what. You had no grudge against me?'

'No.'

'No knowledge of me?'

'No.'

'Then what on earth induced you to do it? Heavens! man,' he continued bluntly, and speaking with greater freedom than he had before used, 'Nature never intended you for a tipstaff. What was it then?'

I rose. It was very late, and the room was empty, the fire low.

'I will tell you—to-morrow,' I said. 'I shall have something to say to you then, of which that will be part.'

He looked at me in great astonishment, and with a little suspicion. But I called for a light, and by going at once to bed, cut short his questions. In the morning we did not meet until it was time to start.

Those who know the south road to Agen, and how the vineyards rise in terraces north of the town, one level of red earth above another, green in summer, but in late autumn bare and stony, may remember a particular place where the road,

two leagues from the town, runs up a steep hill. At the top of the hill four roads meet; and there, plain to be seen against the sky, is a finger-post indicating which way leads to Bordeaux, and which to old tiled Montauban, and which to Perigueux.

This hill had impressed me greatly on my journey south; perhaps because I had enjoyed from it my first extended view of the Garonne Valley, and had there felt myself on the verge of the south country where my mission lay. It had taken root in my memory, so that I had come to look upon its bare rounded head, with the guide-post and the four roads, as the first outpost of Paris, as the first sign of return to the old life.

Now for two days I had been looking forward to seeing it again. That long stretch of road would do admirably for something I had in my mind. That sign-post, with the roads pointing north, south, east, and west — could there be a better place for meetings and partings?

We came to the bottom of the ascent about an hour before noon, M. de Cocheforêt, Mademoiselle,

and I. We had reversed the order of yesterday and I rode ahead; they came after at their leisure. Now, at the foot of the hill I stopped, and letting Mademoiselle pass on, detained M. de Cocheforêt by a gesture.

'Pardon me, one moment,' I said. 'I want to ask a favour.'

He looked at me somewhat fretfully; with a gleam of wildness in his eyes that betrayed how the iron was, little by little, eating into his heart. He had started after breakfast as gaily as a bridegroom, but gradually he had sunk below himself; and now he had much ado to curb his impatience.

'Of me?' he said bitterly. 'What is it?'

'I wish to have a few words with Mademoiselle —alone,' I said.

'Alone?' he exclaimed in astonishment.

'Yes,' I replied, without blenching, though his face grew dark. 'For the matter of that, you can be within call all the time, if you please. But I have a reason for wishing to ride a little way with her.'

'To tell her something?'

'Yes.'

'Then you can tell it to me,' he retorted suspiciously. 'Mademoiselle, I will answer for it, has no desire to—'

'See me or speak to me? No,' I said. 'I can understand that. Yet I want to speak to her.'

'Very well, you can speak in my presence,' he answered rudely. 'If that be all, let us ride on and join her.' And he made a movement as if to do so.

'That will not do, M. de Cocheforêt,' I said firmly, stopping him with my hand. 'Let me beg you to be more complaisant. It is a small thing I ask, a very small thing; but I swear to you that if Mademoiselle does not grant it, she will repent it all her life.'

He looked at me, his face growing darker and darker.

'Fine words,' he said, with a sneer. 'Yet I fancy I understand them.' And then with a passionate oath he broke out. 'But I will not have it! I have not been blind, M. de Berault,

and I understand. But I will not have it. I will have no such Judas bargain made. *Pardieu!* do you think I could suffer it and show my face again?'

'I don't know what you mean,' I said, restraining myself with difficulty. I could have struck the fool.

'But I know what *you* mean,' he replied, in a tone of suppressed rage. 'You would have her sell herself; sell herself to you to save me. And you would have me stand by and see the thing done. No, Sir, never; never, though I go to the wheel. I will die a gentleman, if I have lived a fool.'

'I think that you will do the one as certainly as you have done the other,' I retorted in my exasperation. And yet I admired him.

'Oh, I am not quite a fool!' he cried, scowling at me. 'I have used my eyes.'

'Then be good enough to favour me with your ears!' I answered drily. 'For just a moment. And listen when I say that no such bargain has ever crossed my mind. You were kind enough to

think well of me last night, M. de Cocheforêt. Why should the mention of Mademoiselle in a moment change your opinion? I wish simply to speak to her. I have nothing to ask from her, nothing to expect from her, either favour or anything else. What I say she will doubtless tell you. *Ciel*, man! what harm can I do to her, in the road in your sight?'

He looked at me sullenly, his face still flushed, his eyes suspicious.

'What do you want to say to her?' he asked jealously. He was quite unlike himself. His airy nonchalance, his careless gaiety were gone.

'You know what I do not want to say to her, M. de Cocheforêt,' I answered. 'That should be enough.'

He glowered at me a moment, still ill content. Then, without a word, he made me a gesture to go to her.

She had halted a score of paces away; wondering, doubtless, what was on foot. I rode towards her. She wore her mask, so that I missed the expression of her face as I approached; but the

manner in which she turned her horse's head uncompromisingly towards her brother and looked past me was full of meaning. I felt the ground suddenly cut from under me. I saluted her, trembling.

'Mademoiselle,' I said, 'will you grant me the privilege of your company for a few minutes as we ride?'

'To what purpose?' she answered; surely, in the coldest voice in which a woman ever spoke to a man.

'That I may explain to you a great many things you do not understand,' I murmured.

'I prefer to be in the dark,' she replied. And her manner was more cruel than her words.

'But, Mademoiselle,' I pleaded—I would not be discouraged—'you told me one day, not so long ago, that you would never judge me hastily again.'

'Facts judge you, not I,' she answered icily. 'I am not sufficiently on a level with you to be able to judge you—I thank God.'

I shivered though the sun was on me, and the hollow where we stood was warm.

'Still, once before you thought the same,' I

exclaimed after a pause, 'and afterwards you found that you had been wrong. It may be so again, Mademoiselle.

'Impossible,' she said.

That stung me.

'No,' I cried. 'It is not impossible. It is you who are impossible. It is you who are heartless, Mademoiselle. I have done much in the last three days to make things lighter for you, much to make things more easy; now I ask you to do something in return which can cost you nothing.'

'Nothing?' she answered slowly—and she looked at me; and her eyes and her voice cut me as if they had been knives. 'Nothing? Do you think, Monsieur, it costs me nothing to lose my self-respect, as I do with every word I speak to you? Do you think it costs me nothing to be here when I feel every look you cast upon me an insult, every breath I take in your presence a contamination? Nothing, Monsieur?' she continued with bitter irony. 'Nay, something! But something which I could not hope to make clear to you.'

I sat for a moment confounded, quivering with pain. It had been one thing to feel that she hated and scorned me, to know that the trust and confidence which she had begun to place in me were transformed to loathing. It was another to listen to her hard, pitiless words, to change colour under the lash of her gibing tongue. For a moment I could not find voice to answer her. Then I pointed to M. de Cocheforêt.

'Do you love him?' I said hoarsely, roughly. The gibing tone had passed from her voice to mine.

She did not answer.

'Because if you do you will let me tell my tale. Say no, but once more, Mademoiselle—I am only human—and I go. And you will repent it all your life.'

I had done better had I taken that tone from the beginning. She winced, her head dropped, she seemed to grow smaller. All in a moment, as it were, her pride collapsed.

'I will hear you,' she murmured.

'Then we will ride on, if you please,' I said,

keeping the advantage I had gained. 'You need not fear. Your brother will follow.'

I caught hold of her rein and turned her horse, and she suffered it without demur; and in a moment we were pacing side by side, with the long straight road before us. At the end where it topped the hill, I could see the finger-post, two faint black lines against the sky. When we reached that—involuntarily I checked my horse and made it move more slowly.

'Well, sir?' she said impatiently. And her figure shook as with cold.

'It is a tale I desire to tell you, Mademoiselle,' I answered. 'Perhaps I may seem to begin a long way off, but before I end I promise to interest you. Two months ago there was living in Paris a man—perhaps a bad man—at any rate, by common report a hard man; a man with a peculiar reputation.'

She turned on me suddenly, her eyes gleaming through her mask.

'Oh, Monsieur, spare me this!' she said, quietly scornful. 'I will take it for granted.'

'Very well,' I replied steadfastly. 'Good or bad, he one day, in defiance of the Cardinal's edict against duelling, fought with a young Englishman behind St Jacques' Church. The Englishman had influence, the person of whom I speak had none, and an indifferent name; he was arrested, thrown into the Châtelet, cast for death, left for days to face death. At last an offer was made to him. If he would seek out and deliver up another man, an outlaw with a price upon his head, he should himself go free.'

I paused and drew a deep breath. Then I continued, looking not at her, but into the distance, and speaking slowly.

'Mademoiselle, it seems easy now to say what course he should have chosen. It seems hard now to find excuses for him. But there was one thing which I plead for him. The task he was asked to undertake was a dangerous one. He risked, he knew that he must risk, and the event proved him to be right, his life against the life of this unknown man. And one thing more; time was before him. The outlaw might be taken by another, might be killed,

might die, might— But there, Mademoiselle, we know what answer this person made. He took the baser course, and on his honour, on his parole, with money supplied to him, he went free; free on the condition that he delivered up this other man.'

I paused again, but I did not dare to look at her; and after a moment of silence I resumed.

'Some portion of the second half of the story you know, Mademoiselle; but not all. Suffice it that this man came down to a remote village, and there at risk, but, Heaven knows, basely enough, found his way into his victim's home. Once there, however, his heart began to fail him. Had he found the house garrisoned by men, he might have pressed to his end with little remorse. But he found there only two helpless loyal women; and I say again that from the first hour of his entrance he sickened at the work which he had in hand, the work which ill-fortune had laid upon him. Still he pursued it. He had given his word; and if there was one tradition of his race which this man had never broken, it was that of fidelity to his side—to the man who paid him. But he pursued it with only

half his mind, in great misery, if you will believe me; sometimes in agonies of shame. Gradually, however, almost against his will, the drama worked itself out before him, until he needed only one thing.'

I looked at Mademoiselle, trembling. But her head was averted: I could gather nothing from the outlines of her form; and I went on.

'Do not misunderstand me,' I said in a lower voice. 'Do not misunderstand what I am going to say next. This is no love-story; and can have no ending such as romancers love to set to their tales. But I am bound to mention, Mademoiselle, that this man who had lived almost all his life about inns and eating-houses and at the gaming-tables met here for the first time for years a good woman, and learned by the light of her loyalty and devotion to see what his life had been, and what was the real nature of the work he was doing. I think—nay, I know,' I continued, 'that it added a hundredfold to his misery that when he learned at last the secret he had come to surprise, he learned it from her lips, and in such a way that, had he felt no shame,

hell could have been no place for him. But in one thing I hope she misjudged him. She thought, and had reason to think, that the moment he knew her secret he went out, not even closing the door, and used it. But the truth was that while her words were still in his ears news came to him that others had the secret; and had he not gone out on the instant and done what he did, and forestalled them, M. de Cocheforêt would have been taken, but by others.'

Mademoiselle broke her long silence so suddenly that her horse sprang forward.

'Would to Heaven he had!' she wailed.

'Been taken by others?' I exclaimed, startled out of my false composure.'

'Oh yes, yes!' she answered with a passionate gesture. 'Why did you not tell me? Why did you not confess to me, sir, even at the last moment? I— But, no more! No more!' she continued in a piteous voice; and she tried to urge her horse forward. 'I have heard enough. You are racking my heart, M. de Berault. Some day I will ask God to give me strength to forgive you.'

'But you have not heard me out,' I said.

'I will hear no more,' she answered in a voice she vainly strove to render steady. 'To what end? Can I say more than I have said? Or did you think that I could forgive you now—with him behind us going to his death? Oh, no, no!' she continued. 'Leave me! I implore you to leave me, sir. I am not well.'

She drooped over her horse's neck as she spoke, and began to weep so passionately that the tears ran down her cheeks under her mask, and fell and sparkled like dew on the mane; while her sobs shook her so that I thought she must fall. I stretched out my hand instinctively to give her help, but she shrank from me. 'No!' she gasped, between her sobs. 'Do not touch me. There is too much between us.'

'Yet there must be one thing more between us,' I answered firmly. 'You must listen to me a little longer whether you will or no, Mademoiselle: for the love you bear to your brother. There is one course still open to me by which I may redeem my honour; and it has been in

my mind for some time back to take that course. To-day, I am thankful to say, I can take it cheerfully, if not without regret; with a steadfast heart, if no light one. Mademoiselle,' I continued earnestly. feeling none of the triumph, none of the vanity, none of the elation I had foreseen, but only simple joy in the joy I could give her, 'I thank God that it *is* still in my power to undo what I have done: that it is still in my power to go back to him who sent me, and telling him that I have changed my mind, and will bear my own burdens, to pay the penalty.'

We were within a hundred paces of the top and the finger-post. She cried out wildly that she did not understand. 'What is it you—you —have just said?' she murmured. 'I cannot hear.' And she began to fumble with the ribbon of her mask.

'Only this, Mademoiselle,' I answered gently. 'I give your brother back his word, his parole. From this moment he is free to go whither he pleases. Here, where we stand, four roads meet. That to the right goes to Montauban, where you

have doubtless friends, and can lie hid for a time. Or that to the left leads to Bordeaux, where you can take ship if you please. And in a word, Mademoiselle,' I continued, ending a little feebly, 'I hope that your troubles are now over.'

She turned her face to me—we had both come to a standstill—and plucked at the fastenings of her mask. But her trembling fingers had knotted the string, and in a moment she dropped her hand with a cry of despair. 'But you? You?' she wailed in a voice so changed that I should not have known it for hers. 'What will you do? I do not understand, Monsieur.'

'There is a third road,' I answered. 'It leads to Paris. That is my road, Mademoiselle. We part here.'

'But why?' she cried wildly.

'Because from to-day I would fain begin to be honourable,' I answered in a low voice. 'Because I dare not be generous at another's cost. I must go back whence I came.'

'To the Châtelet?' she muttered.

'Yes, Mademoiselle, to the Châtelet.'

She tried feverishly to raise her mask with her hand.

'I am not well,' she stammered. 'I cannot breathe.'

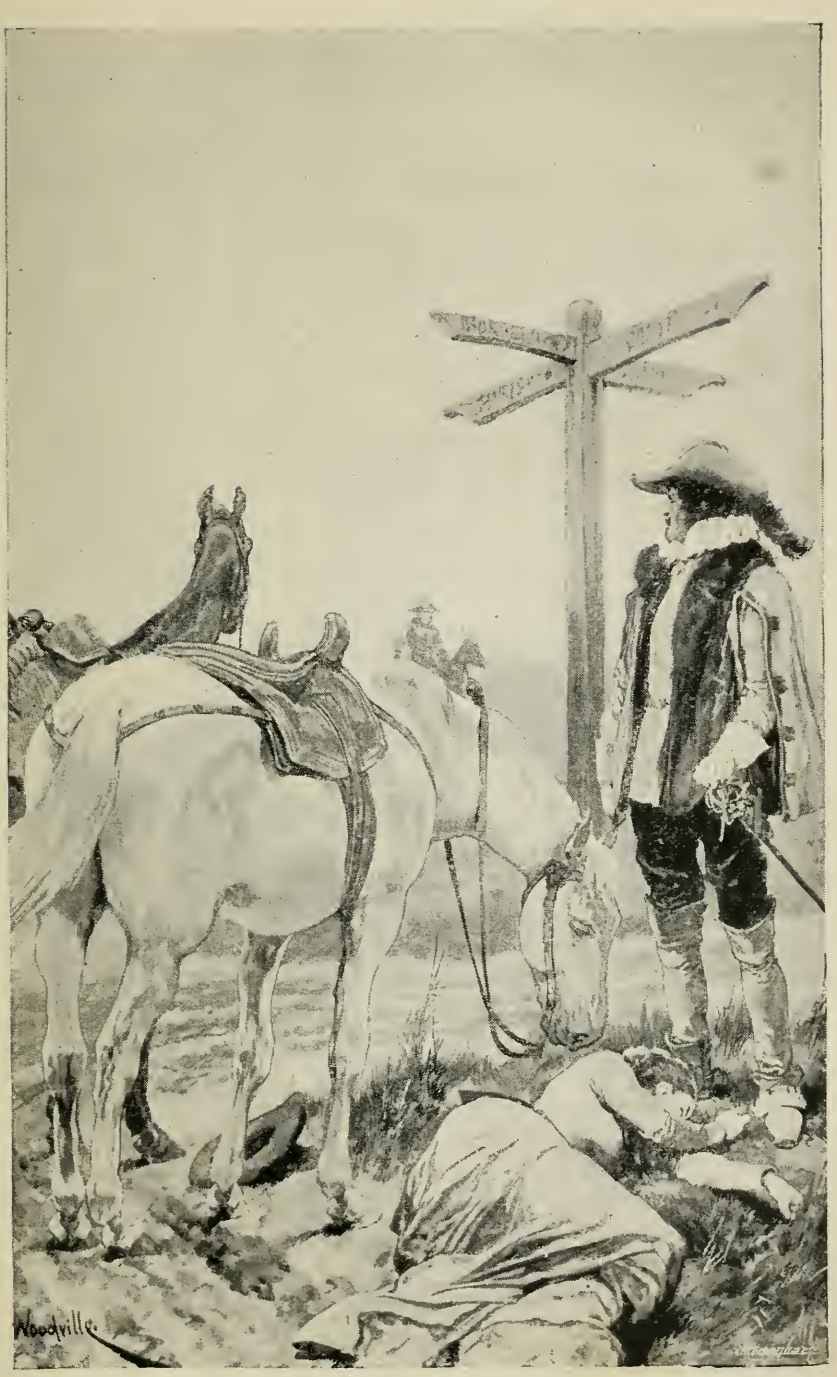
And she began to sway so violently in her saddle that I sprang down, and, running round her horse's head, was just in time to catch her as she fell. She was not quite unconscious then, for as I supported her, she cried out,—

'Do not touch me! Do not touch me! You kill me with shame!'

But as she spoke she clung to me; and I made no mistake. Those words made me happy. I carried her to the bank, my heart on fire, and laid her against it just as M. de Cocheforêt rode up. He sprang from his horse, his eyes blazing. 'What is this?' he cried. 'What have you been saying to her, man?'

'She will tell you,' I answered drily, my composure returning under his eye. 'Amongst other things, that you are free. From this moment M. de Cocheforêt, I give you back your parole, and I take my own honour. Farewell.'

He cried out something as I mounted, but I did not stay to heed or answer. I dashed the spurs into my horse, and rode away past the cross-roads, past the finger-post; away with the level upland stretching before me, dry, bare, almost treeless; and behind me, all I loved. Once, when I had gone a hundred yards, I looked back and saw him standing upright against the sky, staring after me across her body. And again a minute later I looked back. This time saw only the slender wooden cross, and below it a dark blurred mass.



STARING AFTER ME ACROSS HER BODY.

CHAPTER XIV

ST MARTIN'S EVE

IT was late evening on the twenty-ninth of November when I rode into Paris through the Orleans gate. The wind was in the north-east, and a great cloud of vapour hung in the eye of an angry sunset. The air seemed to be heavy with smoke, the kennels reeked, my gorge rose at the city's smell; and with all my heart I envied the man who had gone out of it by the same gate nearly two months before, with his face to the south and the prospect of riding day after day and league after league across heath and moor and pasture. At least he had had some weeks of life before him, and freedom and the open air, and hope and uncertainty; while I came back under doom, and in the pall of smoke that hung over the huddle of innumerable roofs saw a gloomy shadowing of my own fate.

For make no mistake. A man in middle life does not strip himself of the worldly habit with which experience has clothed him, does not run counter to all the hard saws and instances by which he has governed his course so long, without shiverings and doubts and horrible misgivings, and struggles of heart. At least a dozen times between the Loire and Paris I asked myself what honour was, and what good it could do me when I lay rotting and forgotten; if I were not a fool following a Jack o' Lanthorn; and whether, of all the men in the world, the relentless man to whom I was returning would not be the first to gibe at my folly?

However, shame kept me straight; shame and the memory of Mademoiselle's looks and words. I dared not be false to her again; I could not, after speaking so loftily, fall so low. And therefore—though not without many a secret struggle and quaking—I came, on the last evening but one of November, to the Orleans gate, and rode slowly and sadly through the streets by the Luxembourg on my way to the Pont au Change.

The struggle had sapped my last strength, however; and with the first whiff of the gutters, the first rush of barefooted gamins under my horse's hoofs, the first babel of street cries — the first breath, in a word, of Paris — there came a new temptation; to go for one last night to Zaton's, to see the tables again and the faces of surprise, to be for an hour or two the old Berault. That would be no breach of honour, for in any case I could not reach the Cardinal before to-morrow. And it could do no harm. It could make no change in anything. It would not have been a thing worth struggling about, indeed; only—only I had in my inmost heart a suspicion that the stoutest resolutions might lose their force in that atmosphere; and that there even such a talisman as the memory of a woman's looks and words might lose its virtue.

Still, I think that I should have succumbed in the end if I had not received at the corner of the Luxembourg a shock which sobered me effectually. As I passed the gates, a coach, followed by two outriders, swept out of the Palace courtyard;

it was going at a great pace, and I reined my jaded horse on one side to give it room. By chance as it whirled by me, one of the leather curtains flapped back, and I saw for a second by the waning light—the nearer wheels were no more than two feet from my boot—a face inside.

A face and no more, and that only for a second. But it froze me. It was Richelieu's, the Cardinal's; but not as I had been wont to see it—keen, cold, acute, with intellect and indomitable will in every feature. This face was contorted with the rage of impatience, was grim with the fever of haste, and the fear of death. The eyes burned under the pale brow, the moustache bristled, the teeth showed through the beard; I could fancy the man crying 'Faster! Faster!' and gnawing his nails in the impotence of passion; and I shrank back as if I had been struck. The next moment the outriders splashed me, the coach was a hundred paces ahead, and I was left chilled and wondering, foreseeing the worst, and no longer in any mood for Zaton's.

Such a revelation of such a man was enough to

appal me, for a moment conscience cried out that he must have heard that Cocheforêt had escaped him, and through me. But I dismissed the idea as soon as formed. In the vast meshes of the Cardinal's schemes Cocheforêt could be only a small fish; and to account for the face in the coach I needed a cataclysm, a catastrophe, a misfortune as far above ordinary mishaps as this man's intellect rose above the common run of minds.

It was almost dark when I crossed the bridges, and crept despondently to the Rue Savonnerie. After stabling my horse I took my bag and holsters, and climbing the stairs to my old landlord's — I remember that the place had grown, as it seemed to me, strangely mean and small and ill-smelling in my absence — I knocked at the door. It was promptly opened by the little tailor himself, who threw up his arms and opened his eyes at sight of me.

'By Saint Geneviève!' he said, 'if it is not M. de Berault!'

'It is,' I said. It touched me a little, after my lonely journey, to find him so glad to see

me; though I had never done him a greater benefit than sometimes to unbend with him and borrow his money. 'You look surprised, little man!' I continued, as he made way for me to to enter. 'I'll be sworn that you have been pawning my goods and letting my room, you knave!'

'Never, your Excellency!' he answered. 'On the contrary, I have been expecting you.'

'How?' I said. 'To-day?'

'To-day or to-morrow,' he answered, following me in and closing the door. 'The first thing I said when I heard the news this morning was —now we shall have M. de Berault back again. Your Excellency will pardon the children,' he continued, bobbing round me, as I took the old seat on the three-legged stool before the hearth. 'The night is cold and there is no fire in your room.'

While he ran to and fro with my cloak and bags, little Gil, to whom I had stood at St Sulpice's, borrowing ten crowns the same day, I remember, came shyly to play with my sword-hilt.

'So you expected me back when you heard the news, Frison, did you?' I said, taking the lad on my knee.

'To be sure, your Excellency,' he answered, peeping into the black pot before he lifted it to the hook.

'Very good. Then now let us hear what the news is,' I said drily.

'Of the Cardinal, M. de Berault.'

'Ah! And what?'

He looked at me, holding the heavy pot suspended in his hands.

'You have not heard?' he exclaimed in astonishment.

'Not a tittle. Tell it me, my good fellow.'

'You have not heard that his Eminence is disgraced?'

I stared at him. 'Not a word,' I said.

He set down the pot.

'Then your Excellency must have made a very long journey indeed,' he said with conviction. 'For it has been in the air a week or more, and I thought that it had brought you back.

A week? A month, I dare say. They whisper that it is the old Queen's doing. At any rate, it is certain that they have cancelled his commissions and displaced his officers. There are rumours of immediate peace with Spain. Everywhere his enemies are lifting up their heads; and I hear that he has relays of horses set all the way to the coast that he may fly at any moment. For what I know he may be gone already.'

'But, man—' I said, surprised out of my composure. 'The King! You forget the King. Let the Cardinal once pipe to him and he will dance. And they will dance too!' I added grimly.

'Yes,' Frison answered eagerly. 'True, your Excellency, but the King will not see him. Three times to-day, as I am told, the Cardinal has driven to the Luxembourg and stood like any common man in the ante-chamber, so that I hear it was pitiful to see him. But his Majesty would not admit him. And when he went away the last time I am told that his face was

like death! Well, he was a great man, and we may be worse ruled, M. de Berault, saving your presence. If the nobles did not like him, he was good to the traders and the bourgeoisie, and equal to all.'

'Silence, man! Silence, and let me think,' I said, much excited. And while he bustled to and fro, getting my supper, and the firelight played about the snug, sorry little room, and the child toyed with his plaything, I fell to digesting this great news, and pondering how I stood now and what I ought to do. At first sight, I know, it seemed to me that I had nothing to do but to sit still. In a few hours the man who had taken my bond would be powerless, and I should be free; in a few hours I might smile at him. To all appearance the dice had fallen well for me. I had done a great thing, run a great risk, won a woman's love; and, after all, I was not to pay the penalty.

But a word which fell from Frison as he fluttered round me, pouring out the broth and cutting the

bread, dropped into my mind and spoiled my satisfaction.

'Yes, your Excellency,' he said, confirming something he had stated before and which I had missed, 'and I am told that the last time he came into the gallery there was not a man of all the scores who had been at his levée last Monday would speak to him. They fell off like rats—just like rats—until he was left standing alone. And I have seen him!'—Frison lifted up his eyes and his hands and drew in his breath—'Ah! I have seen the King look shabby beside him! And his eye! I would not like to meet it now.'

'Pish!' I growled. 'Someone has fooled you. Men are wiser than that.'

'So? Well, your Excellency understands,' he answered meekly. 'But—there are no cats on a cold hearth.'

I told him again that he was a fool. But for all that, and my reasoning, I felt uncomfortable. This was a great man, if ever a great man lived, and they were all leaving him; and I—well, I had no cause to love him. But I had taken his money,

I had accepted his commission, and I had betrayed him. These three things being so, if he fell before I could—with the best will in the world—set myself right with him, so much the better for me. That was my gain—the fortune of war, the turn of the dice. But if I lay hid, and took time for my ally, and being here while he still stood, though tottering, waited until he fell, what of my honour then? What of the grand words I had said to Mademoiselle at Agen? I should be like the recreant in the old romance, who, lying in the ditch while the battle raged, came out afterwards and boasted of his courage.

And yet the flesh was weak. A day, twenty-four hours, two days, might make the difference between life and death, love and death; and I wavered. But at last I settled what I would do. At noon the next day, the time at which I should have presented myself if I had not heard this news, at that time I would still present myself. Not earlier; I owed myself the chance. Not later; that was due to him.

Having so settled it, I thought to rest in peace.

But with the first light I was awake, and it was all I could do to keep myself quiet until I heard Frison stirring. I called to him then to know if there was any news, and lay waiting and listening while he went down to the street to learn. It seemed an endless time before he came back; an age, when he came back, before he spoke.

'Well, he has not set off?' I asked at last, unable to control my eagerness.

Of course he had not; and at nine o'clock I sent Frison out again; and at ten and eleven—always with the same result. I was like a man waiting and looking and, above all, listening for a reprieve; and as sick as any craven. But when he came back, at eleven, I gave up hope and dressed myself carefully. I suppose I had an odd look then, however, for Frison stopped me at the door, and asked me, with evident alarm, where I was going.

I put the little man aside gently.

'To the tables,' I said, 'to make a big throw, my friend.'

It was a fine morning, sunny, keen, pleasant, when I went out into the street; but I scarcely

noticed it. All my thoughts were where I was going, so that it seemed but a step from my threshold to the Hotel Richelieu ; I was no sooner gone from the one than I found myself at the other. Now, as on a memorable evening when I had crossed the street in a drizzling rain, and looked that way with foreboding, there were two or three guards, in the Cardinal's livery, loitering in front of the great gates. Coming nearer, I found the opposite pavement under the Louvre thronged with people, not moving about their business, but standing all silent, all looking across furtively, all with the air of persons who wished to be thought passing by. Their silence and their keen looks had in some way an air of menace. Looking back after I had turned in towards the gates, I found them devouring me with their eyes.

And certainly they had little else to look at. In the courtyard where, some mornings, when the Court was in Paris, I had seen a score of coaches waiting and thrice as many servants, were now emptiness and sunshine and stillness. The officer on guard, twirling his moustachios, looked at me in wonder

as I passed him; the lackeys lounging in the portico, and all too much taken up with whispering to make a pretence of being of service, grinned at my appearance. But that which happened when I had mounted the stairs and came to the door of the ante-chamber outdid all. The man on guard would have opened the door, but when I went to enter, a major-domo who was standing by, muttering with two or three of his kind, hastened forward and stopped me.

'Your business, Monsieur, if you please?' he said inquisitively; while I wondered why he and the others looked at me so strangely.

'I am M. de Berault,' I answered sharply. 'I have the entrée.'

He bowed politely enough.

'Yes, M. de Berault, I have the honour to know your face,' he said. 'But—pardon me. Have you business with his Eminence?'

'I have the common business,' I answered sharply. 'By which many of us live, sirrah! To wait on him.'

'But—by appointment, Monsieur?'

'No,' I said, astonished. 'It is the usual hour. For the matter of that, however, I have business with him.'

The man still looked at me for a moment in seeming embarrassment. Then he stood aside and signed to the door-keeper to open the door. I passed in, uncovering; with an assured face and steadfast mien, ready to meet all eyes. In a moment, on the threshold, the mystery was explained.

The room was empty.

CHAPTER XV

ST MARTIN'S SUMMER

YES, at the great Cardinal's levée I was the only client! I stared round the room, a long, narrow gallery, through which it was his custom to walk every morning, after receiving his more important visitors. I stared, I say, from side to side, in a state of stupefaction. The seats against either wall were empty, the recesses of the windows empty too. The hat sculptured and painted here and there, the staring R, the blazoned arms looked down on a vacant floor. Only on a little stool by the farther door, sat a quiet-faced man in black, who read, or pretended to read, in a little book, and never looked up. One of those men, blind, deaf, secretive, who fatten in the shadow of the great.

Suddenly, while I stood confounded and full of shamed thought—for I had seen the antechamber of Richelieu's old hotel so crowded that he could

not walk through it—this man closed his book, rose and came noiselessly towards me.

'M. de Berault?' he said.

'Yes,' I answered.

'His Eminence awaits you. Be good enough to follow me.'

I did so, in a deeper stupor than before. For how could the Cardinal know that I was here? How could he have known when he gave the order? But I had short time to think of these things, or others. We passed through two rooms, in one of which some secretaries were writing, we stopped at a third door. Over all brooded a silence which could be felt. The usher knocked, opened, and, with his finger on his lip, pushed aside a curtain and signed to me to enter. I did so and found myself behind a screen.

'Is that M. de Berault?' asked a thin, high-pitched voice.

'Yes, Monseigneur,' I answered trembling.

'Then come, my friend, and talk to me.'

I went round the screen, and I know not how it was, the watching crowd outside, the vacant ante-

chamber in which I had stood, the stillness and silence all seemed to be concentrated here, and to give to the man I saw before me a dignity which he had never possessed for me when the world passed through his doors, and the proudest fawned on him for a smile. He sat in a great chair on the farther side of the hearth, a little red skull-cap on his head, his fine hands lying still in his lap. The collar of lawn which fell over his cape was quite plain, but the skirts of his red robe were covered with rich lace, and the order of the Holy Ghost, a white dove on a gold cross, shone on his breast. Among the multitudinous papers on the great table near him I saw a sword and pistols; and some tapestry that covered a little table behind him failed to hide a pair of spurred riding-boots. But as I advanced he looked towards me with the utmost composure; with a face mild and almost benign, in which I strove in vain to read the traces of last night's passion. So that it flashed across me that if this man really stood (and afterwards I knew that he did) on the thin razor-edge between life and death, between the supreme of earthly

power, lord of France and arbiter of Europe, and the nothingness of the clod, he justified his fame. He gave weaker natures no room for triumph.

The thought was no sooner entertained than it was gone.

'And so you are back at last, M. de Berault,' he said gently. 'I have been expecting to see you since nine this morning.'

'Your Eminence knew, then—' I muttered.

'That you returned to Paris by the Orleans gate last evening alone?' he answered, fitting together the ends of his fingers, and looking at me over them with inscrutable eyes. 'Yes, I knew all that last night. And now, of your business. You have been faithful and diligent, I am sure. Where is he?'

I stared at him and was dumb. In some way the strange things I had seen since I had left my lodgings, the surprises I had found awaiting me here, had driven my own fortunes, my own peril, out of my head—until this moment. Now, at this question, all returned with a rush, and I remembered where I stood. My heart heaved suddenly in my breast. I strove for a savour of

the old hardihood, but for the moment I could not find a word.

'Well,' he said lightly, a faint smile lifting his moustache. 'You do not speak. You left Auch with him on the twenty-fourth, M. de Berault. So much I know. And you reached Paris without him last night. He has not given you the slip?'

'No, Monseigneur,' I muttered.

'Ha! that is good,' he answered, sinking back again in his chair. 'For the moment—but I knew that I could depend on you. And now where is he? What have you done with him? He knows much, and the sooner I know it the better. Are your people bringing him, M. de Berault?'

'No, Monseigneur,' I stammered, with dry lips. His very good-humour, his benignity, appalled me. I knew how terrible would be the change, how fearful his rage, when I should tell him the truth. And yet that I, Gil de Berault, should tremble before any man! With that thought I spurred myself, as it were, to the task. 'No, your Eminence,' I said, with the energy of despair. 'I have not brought him, because I have set him free.'

'Because you have—*what?*' he exclaimed. He leaned forward as he spoke, his hands on the arm of the chair; and his eyes growing each instant smaller, seemed to read my soul.

'Because I have let him go,' I repeated.

'And why?' he said, in a voice like the rasping of a file.

'Because I took him unfairly,' I answered. 'Because, Monseigneur, I am a gentleman, and this task should have been given to one who was not. I took him, if you must know,' I continued impatiently—the fence once crossed I was growing bolder—'by dogging a woman's steps and winning her confidence and betraying it. And whatever I have done ill in my life—of which you were good enough to throw something in my teeth when I was last here—I have never done that, and I will not!'

'And so you set him free?'

'Yes.'

'After you had brought him to Auch?'

'Yes.'

'And, in point of fact, saved him from falling into the hands of the Commandant at Auch?'

'Yes,' I answered desperately to all.

'Then, what of the trust I placed in you, sirrah?' he rejoined, in a terrible voice; and stooping still farther forward he probed me with his eyes. 'You who prate of trust and confidence, who received your life on parole, and but for your promise to me would have been carrion this month past, answer me that? What of the trust I placed in you?'

'The answer is simple,' I said, shrugging my shoulders with a touch of my old self. 'I am here to pay the penalty.'

'And do you think that I do not know why?' he retorted, striking one hand on the arm of his chair with a force that startled me. 'Because you have heard, sir, that my power is gone! Because you have heard that I, who was yesterday the King's right hand, am to-day dried up, withered and paralysed! Because you have heard — but have a care! have a care!' he continued with extraordinary vehemence, and in a voice like a dog's snarl. 'You and those others! Have a care, I say, or you may find yourselves mistaken yet.'

'As Heaven shall judge me,' I answered solemnly 'that is not true. Until I reached Paris last night I knew nothing of this report. I came here with a single mind, to redeem my honour by placing again in your Eminence's hands that which you gave me on trust, and here I do place it.'

For a moment he remained in the same attitude, staring at me fixedly. Then his face relaxed somewhat.

'Be good enough to ring that bell,' he said.

It stood on a table near me. I rang it, and a velvet-footed man in black came in, and gliding up to the Cardinal, placed a paper in his hand. The Cardinal looked at it; while the man stood with his head obsequiously bent, and my heart beat furiously.

'Very good,' his Eminence said, after a pause which seemed to me to be endless. 'Let the doors be thrown open.'

The man bowed low, and retired behind the screen. I heard a little bell ring somewhere in the silence, and in a moment the Cardinal stood up.

'Follow me!' he said, with a strange flash of his keen eyes.

Astonished, I stood aside while he passed to the screen; then I followed him. Outside the first door, which stood open, we found eight or nine persons—pages, a monk, the major-domo, and several guards waiting like mutes. These signed to me to precede them and fell in behind us, and in that order we passed through the first room and the second, where the clerks stood with bent heads to receive us. The last door, the door of the ante-chamber, flew open as we approached, voices cried, 'Room! Room for his Eminence!' we passed through two lines of bowing lackeys, and entered —an empty chamber.

The ushers did not know how to look at one another; the lackeys trembled in their shoes. But the Cardinal walked on, apparently unmoved, until he had passed slowly half the length of the chamber. Then he turned himself about, looking first to one side and then to the other, with a low laugh of derision.

'Father,' he said in his thin voice, 'what does

the Psalmist say? "I am become like a pelican in the wilderness and like an owl that is in the desert!"'

The monk mumbled assent.

'And later in the same psalm, is it not written, "They shall perish, but thou shalt endure?"'

'It is so,' the father answered. 'Amen.'

'Doubtless though, that refers to another life,' the Cardinal said, with his slow wintry smile. 'In the meantime we will go back to our books, and serve God and the King in small things if not in great. Come, father, this is no longer a place for us. *Vanitas vanitatum—omnia vanitas!* We will retire.'

And as solemnly as we had come we marched back through the first and second and third doors until we stood again in the silence of the Cardinal's chamber—he and I and the velvet-footed man in black. For a while Richelieu seemed to forget me. He stood brooding on the hearth, his eyes on a small fire, which burned there though the weather was warm. Once I heard him laugh, and twice he uttered in a tone of bitter mockery the words,—

'Fools! Fools! 'Fools!'

At last he looked up, saw me, and started.

'Ah!' he said, 'I had forgotten you. Well, you are fortunate, M. de Berault. Yesterday I had a hundred clients; to-day I have only one, and I cannot afford to hang him. But for your liberty—that is another matter.'

I would have said something, pleaded something; but he turned abruptly to the table, and sitting down wrote a few lines on a piece of paper. Then he rang his bell, while I stood waiting and confounded.

The man in black came from behind the screen.

'Take this letter and that gentleman to the upper guard-room,' the Cardinal said sharply. 'I can hear no more,' he continued, frowning and raising his hand to forbid interruption. 'The matter is ended, M. de Berault. Be thankful.'

In a moment I was outside the door, my head in a whirl, my heart divided between gratitude and resentment. I would fain have stood to consider my position; but I had no time. Obeying a gesture, I followed my guide along several passages, and everywhere found the same silence, the same monastic stillness. At length, while I

was dolefully considering whether the Bastille or the Châtelet would be my fate, he stopped at a door, thrust the letter into my hands, and lifting the latch, signed to me to enter.

I went in in amazement, and stopped in confusion. Before me, alone, just risen from a chair, with her face one moment pale, the next crimson with blushes, stood Mademoiselle de Cocheforêt. I cried out her name.

'M. de Berault,' she said, trembling. 'You did not expect to see me?'

'I expected to see no one so little, Mademoiselle,' I answered, striving to recover my composure.

'Yet you might have thought that we should not utterly desert you,' she replied, with a reproachful humility which went to my heart. 'We should have been base indeed, if we had not made some attempt to save you. I thank Heaven, M. de Berault, that it has so far succeeded that that strange man has promised me your life. You have seen him?' she continued eagerly and in another tone, while her eyes grew on a sudden large with fear.

'Yes, Mademoiselle,' I said. 'I have seen him, and it is true. He has given me my life.'

'And—?'

'And sent me into imprisonment.'

'For how long?' she whispered.

'I do not know,' I answered. 'I fear during the King's pleasure.'

She shuddered.

'I may have done more harm than good,' she murmured, looking at me piteously. 'But I did it for the best. I told him all, and perhaps I did harm.'

But to hear her accuse herself thus, when she had made this long and lonely journey to save me, when she had forced herself into her enemy's presence, and had, as I was sure she had, abased herself for me, was more than I could bear.

'Hush, Mademoiselle, hush!' I said, almost roughly. 'You hurt me. You have made me happy; and yet I wish that you were not here, where, I fear, you have few friends, but back at Cocheforêt. You have done more for me than I expected, and a hundred times more than I deserved. But it must end here. I was a ruined

man before this happened, before I ever saw you. I am no worse now, but I am still that; and I would not have your name pinned to mine on Paris lips. Therefore, good-bye. God forbid I should say more to you, or let you stay where foul tongues would soon malign you.'

She looked at me in a kind of wonder; then, with a growing smile,—

'It is too late,' she said gently.

'Too late?' I exclaimed. 'How, Mademoiselle?'

'Because—do you remember, M. de Berault, what you told me of your love-story under the guide-post by Agen? That it could have no happy ending? For the same reason I was not ashamed to tell mine to the Cardinal. By this time it is common property.'

I looked at her as she stood facing me. Her eyes shone under the lashes that almost hid them. Her figure drooped, and yet a smile trembled on her lips.

'*What* did you tell him, Mademoiselle?' I whispered, my breath coming quickly.

'That I loved,' she answered boldly, raising her clear eyes to mine. 'And therefore that I was not ashamed to beg—even on my knees.'

I fell on mine, and caught her hand before the last word passed her lips. For the moment I forgot King and Cardinal, prison and the future, all; all except that this woman, so pure and so beautiful, so far above me in all things, loved me. For the moment, I say. Then I remembered myself. I stood up, and stood back from her in a sudden revulsion of feeling.

'You do not know me!' I cried. 'You do not know what I have done!'

'That is what I do know,' she answered, looking at me with a wondrous smile.

'Ah! but you do not!' I cried. 'And besides, there is this—this between us.' And I picked up the Cardinal's letter. It had fallen on the floor.

She turned a shade paler. Then she cried quickly,—

'Open it! open it! It is not sealed nor closed.'

I obeyed mechanically, dreading with a horrible dread what I might see. Even when I had it open

I looked at the finely scrawled characters with eyes askance. But at last I made it out. And it ran thus :—

'*The King's pleasure is that M. Gil de Berault, having mixed himself up with affairs of state, retire forthwith to the demesne of Cocheforêt, and confine himself within its limits until the King's pleasure be further known.*

'THE CARDINAL DE RICHELIEU.'

. . . . . .

We were married next day, and a fortnight later were at Cocheforêt, in the brown woods under the southern mountains ; while the great Cardinal, once more triumphant over his enemies, saw with cold, smiling eyes the world pass through his chamber. The flood-tide of his prosperity lasted thirteen years from that time, and ceased only with his death. For the world had learned its lesson ; to this hour they call that day, which saw me stand alone for all his friends, 'The Day of Dupes.'

THE END.

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